



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT

(Hansard)

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| <i>Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety</i> | Mr Michael McGimpsey |

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

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 18 May 2009

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClarty] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has asked me to advise the House that he will be absent from Parliament Buildings today on official Assembly business.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Swine Flu

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that he wishes to make a statement on the outbreak of swine flu.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I wish to provide Members with a further update on the swine flu virus. The most significant development has been the announcement of Northern Ireland's first confirmed case of swine flu. People should not be alarmed by that, because, in the light of the situation across the world, it was only to be expected that there would be a case in Northern Ireland. I am pleased to hear that the individual concerned, who recently returned from Mexico, is at home and continues to make a good recovery.

It is reassuring that, to date, confirmed cases of swine flu across the UK have all been relatively mild, and all those who have been affected have responded well to antiviral treatment. The strategy to use antiviral drugs to contain the spread of the virus appears to have been effective in reducing both the spread of the virus and its symptoms. The Public Health Agency has contacted passengers who travelled on the same flight as the individual who has been confirmed as having swine flu. As the flight was more than seven days ago, the Public Health Agency's advice is that the risk of infection is very low.

I also emphasise that there have been no cases of swine flu in schoolchildren in Northern Ireland; parents, teachers and pupils can be reassured by that. The message to schoolchildren and everyone else is to follow simple, effective measures to reduce the spread of the flu. Hands should be washed frequently with soap and water, and a tissue should be used to cover the mouth and nose when sneezing. Anyone who has travelled to Mexico or another affected area in the past week and who subsequently develops a flu-like illness should stay at home and seek medical advice from a GP. The GP will then contact the Public Health Agency, which in turn will quickly ensure that any necessary further investigation is carried out and treatment administered.

This is a developing situation that we are continuing to monitor very closely. It is clear that the virus continues to spread across the world, and there are now confirmed cases in 36 countries. In the UK, there are now 101 confirmed cases, and there is one in the Republic of Ireland. As I stated already, Northern Ireland has only one confirmed case of swine flu, and two are under investigation. The World Health Organization pandemic alert level remains at phase 5. That indicates the increasing likelihood of a pandemic but does not, I stress, suggest that one is inevitable.

I realise that the confirmation of Northern Ireland's first case may have caused some public concern. The clear advice of the Public Health Agency and that of other health professionals is that, although they are treating the current global situation seriously, there is good reason to be confident that we can deal with it. Scientists have examined previous pandemics, and we now know much more than ever before about treatments and about how to stop the virus spreading. A good deal of work is under way in studying the virus. However, it is still too early to determine what impact swine flu will have, and it is not possible to predict whether the virus will remain mild. We must continue to be vigilant, and we must prepare for a potential further wave of the swine flu virus in the autumn, when it may be more widespread.

In the light of that, it is essential that we use our stock of antiviral drugs carefully so that the public will be protected during the winter months. Northern Ireland is well prepared for any potential pandemic and has been planning for such a situation for years. In the past few days, an agreement to secure the production of a pre-pandemic vaccine has been signed. That is an opportunity to secure vaccine supplies for the UK in advance of a pandemic wave. Those arrangements provide the opportunity to have enough pre-pandemic vaccine by December to protect at least half the population from swine flu. In addition, as part of our plans to deal with a pandemic, we have sleeping contracts in place. If the World Health Organization

pandemic alert level moves to phase 6 and a pandemic is declared, we will receive a vaccine when it becomes available. That means that everyone in Northern Ireland will have access to two doses of the pandemic vaccine if they need them.

It will, however, be several months before a vaccine becomes available. In the interim, we need to ensure that we have enough antiviral drugs to treat those who may need them. We have a stock of antiviral drugs that will cover half the population. Steps are in place to increase that so that there will be antiviral drugs to treat up to 80% of the population. Previous global pandemics have not been known to have affected more than one third of the population.

The arrangements that we have in place and that we are continuing to make will help us to respond well to any emerging situation. Officials of my Department, together with staff of the Public Health Agency and in the health and social care sector, have been working tirelessly to ensure that there is robust surveillance and appropriate testing of individuals who are at risk. They have also put measures in place to ensure the immediate availability of antiviral medications to those who may need them.

The public should be reassured that the health and social care service, GPs and other health professionals are geared up to deal with the situation. Supplies of antiviral drugs have been sent to hospitals, GP out-of-hours centres and community pharmacies. Work is also under way to increase supplies of antibiotics to ensure that we have enough to treat the potential complications of influenza, particularly pneumonia.

The Northern Ireland swine flu helpline continues to operate, and up to 1,700 calls have been made to the 0800 0514 142 number since it was set up at the end of April. Information on swine flu is also available from the UK swine flu information line, the number for which is 0800 1 513 513. A major publicity campaign, including television, radio and newspaper advertising, has been running over the past few weeks. I believe that that has been effective in communicating the steps that people can take to protect themselves. The main way that the public can help to prevent the spread of the virus is to follow good hygiene practices. That includes washing hands regularly, using a clean tissue to cover the mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, and remaining at home if flu-like symptoms develop. Those are simple yet highly effective steps that every individual can take and that will make a real difference.

Every home in Northern Ireland should now have received a leaflet providing further public advice and information. Again, I ask people to read the leaflet and keep it safe. I continue to receive full and detailed briefings on the situation as it develops, and those include taking part in regular (COBRA) meetings,

which the Secretary of State for Health in England, Alan Johnson, chairs and which the Health Ministers from Wales and Scotland also attend.

Daily updates on the situation continue to be issued to the media and to all Assembly Members. I assure the public and the Assembly that this issue is being taken seriously by the Government not just in Northern Ireland but across the world. I will, of course, report again to the Assembly if there are significant changes to the current situation.

In the meantime, Members can remain assured that we have the necessary capability to respond to the swine flu virus. The Health Service is well prepared, and I thank Health Service staff for the commitment, support and dedication that they have demonstrated in the face of a potential pandemic.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for again updating the House on the situation facing us.

Over the past few weeks, people's awareness about what they can do to curb the spread of swine flu has been raised by a public information campaign, which involves running adverts and providing leaflets at hospitals, GPs' surgeries and other public places. How much has that cost the Department to date? Will individual trusts be requested at any stage to pay for adverts, educational programmes or even vaccines for the areas that they serve?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Substantial costs are involved that were not contained in the health budget. Therefore, we will be seeking money to cover those costs in due course. I do not anticipate asking trusts to pay for Northern Ireland's share of the vaccine, the cost of which will be considerable. Given the commercial sensitivity of the issue, I do not want to get into details. However, I can say that the total cost of vaccines, antiviral drugs, extra antibiotics and all the other arrangements has placed a considerable burden on the Health Service. My permanent secretary is in conversation with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) about the matter. Within UK funding arrangements, there is a contingency fund for emergency and crisis situations. That is a matter for discussion between DFP and the Treasury.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like the previous Member, I thank the Minister for updating the House today. I give credit where credit is due, and I congratulate the Minister and his officials, as well as the Public Health Agency, on taking a measured approach to the issue and on their work to date, including the daily updates, which have been quite useful. I also take this opportunity to send my best wishes to the individual who has contracted swine flu; I wish him a speedy recovery.

The Minister said that the Public Health Agency has contacted the passengers who travelled on the same

flight from London to Belfast as the man who contracted swine flu. Have the passengers who travelled on the flight from Mexico to London been contacted, because some of them might not have got that return flight to Belfast? Have the people who were in the vicinity of the hospital when the man presented himself at the accident and emergency department been contacted? Is the Minister in regular contact with the Department of Health and Children in Dublin about the issue?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am pleased to say that the patient is responding very well to antiviral drugs. His family and the wider community are also receiving antiviral drugs. The Health Service is providing antiviral drugs to 16 people in the community as a precaution.

12.15 pm

There are no direct flights between Ireland and Mexico; the flights come through other airports, primarily Gatwick. That individual flew from Mexico to Gatwick, where the standard procedure is that officials from the Health Protection Agency meet all aeroplanes and provide information to all passengers. He will have received that information. Staff from the Public Health Agency meet all planes that arrive at Northern Ireland airports and provide information to the passengers. That individual's flight landed on Friday 8 May. The maximum incubation period is seven days, so the risk to anyone who was on that flight and has not already developed symptoms is extremely low.

We have contacted the passengers, and we consider that 76 of them, including the crew, are from or are based in Northern Ireland. Of those, 20 have been placed on antiviral drugs. Other people in England, Scotland and Wales will have been contacted by their authorities. I have no doubt that, if they had been considered to be at risk, they would have been given antiviral drugs.

My officials are in constant contact with the authorities in the Irish Republic, and they keep them updated.

Mrs Hanna: I thank the Minister for providing another update and for his reassurances that his Department has the necessary capability to respond to and deal with swine flu. The Minister said that he had signed an agreement to secure a pre-pandemic vaccine and that the Department will receive that when it becomes available. Is there a difference between the pre-pandemic vaccine and the vaccine itself? Is the Department giving clear guidance on travelling to Mexico at this time?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Advice on travel arrangements is provided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which advises that people should not travel to Mexico

unless it is absolutely essential to do so. It has provided that advice for the past couple of weeks.

As part of the UK response, there are sleeping contracts for a vaccine, when it is developed, to cover every man, woman and child in Northern Ireland. The vaccine will run to 132 million individual shots or doses, because it is anticipated that two would be needed for each person. Those sleeping contracts will automatically go into operation and production once the World Health Organization declares level 6, which is pandemic level.

We have also placed orders for a pre-pandemic vaccine, which is the same vaccine. If the World Health Organization does not declare level 6, the sleeping contracts will not come into play. The four countries of the United Kingdom will buy what we call a pre-pandemic vaccine, which will provide an immediate opportunity to begin vaccination.

Dr Deeny: I also commend the Minister and his Department for dealing with swine flu in a professional manner, both medically and politically. We have heard that the vaccine will be available from December. Will the vaccine be able to be incorporated into the annual winter flu vaccine, a new one of which is issued every year? That may not be possible, because work begins on that in February each year. If that is not the case, I suspect that two vaccines will be needed to protect our population. One will be the annual vaccine, and the other will be the vaccine for swine flu. That should not be a problem, considering the number of vaccinations that children have.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The point about the winter flu vaccine is important because there is an issue about production capacity, and our contract requirements to fill the required number of winter flu vaccines for the current year will be completed in June. Only after that will factories be able to proceed to production of the vaccine for the pre-pandemic or pandemic flu — whichever one wants to call it. Although there may be an opportunity to combine the two vaccines in future years, in 2009 there will be two separate vaccinations: one for winter flu, which is already under production; and, subsequently, the swine flu vaccine, when it becomes available.

Mr Easton: I welcome the Minister's statement and the hard work that he is putting into the Department's response to swine flu. Can he tell the House whether the Department has been in contact with health organisations throughout the world? The spread of swine flu seems to be slowing down as it moves outside Mexico. Thankfully, there have been few deaths outside of that country.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The response is very much international,

national and local. The Department is responsible for the local response. The national response is handled through COBRA and the four health Departments. The World Health Organization is responsible for co-ordinating the international response.

One feature of the outbreak is that its spread does not appear to be slowing down. The US has overtaken Mexico in its number of confirmed cases, which is now almost 5,000. The update that I received on Sunday informed me that there have been four deaths in the US, although I understand that that number has since risen. I will receive another update shortly. In Mexico, there have been slightly fewer than 3,000 cases and 66 deaths. Canada has slightly fewer than 500 confirmed cases.

One feature of the virus is that its speed of travel appears to be significant. I say “appears” because no one can be absolutely definitive about a new and novel virus. That speed is not simply due to aeroplane travel; there appears also to be rapid person-to-person infection. The World Health Organization’s estimate, which I heard during the weekend, is that, within 12 months, approximately one third of the earth’s entire population will be infected with the virus. As the earth’s population is around seven billion people, Members can appreciate that the number of people who are liable to be infected is staggering. That is why COBRA regards production and access to pre-pandemic vaccines as highly important.

Mr T Clarke: I also thank the Minister for today’s update. Why did the infected person present himself at A&E and not to his general practitioner? I was approached by a constituent who has flu and who had contacted his GP. He was told not to come into the surgery, and no one was sent to see him. Is it the case that not all GPs have been brought up to speed on the proper procedure?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: GPs have been brought up to speed on the proper procedure. Indeed, the British Medical Association commended the Department in that respect. The proper procedure is that people do not present to A&E departments or to GPs. The best way to tackle the virus is through self-containment and isolation at home. A person should ring his or her GP, who will arrange for antivirals to be delivered, provided that the patient meets the case definition, which is that he or she has been to an affected area or has been in contact with such a person and that he or she exhibits the symptoms of Mexico’s swine flu.

At present, the response to the virus is at containment stage, which means that, if a person contacts his or her GP, someone will take samples from that person for testing. As I have said, GPs have received that information. That is regarded as crucial because GPs

are at the front line and are normally the first point of contact for patients. The procedure is laid down in the leaflet that has been provided by the Department. Our aim is to ensure that that procedure is followed during the containment stage.

Eventually, I anticipate that the response will reach the post-containment stage. At that point, there will be no automatic testing. If someone exhibits symptoms, he or she will be given medication immediately. At present, however, the aim is to contain the virus.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his commitment and dedication to the issue. His statement makes it clear that the risk of catching the virus in Mexico is very high and advises people to not travel there. However, in the real world, many young couples have recently married and have spent thousands of pounds on a honeymoon to Mexico. What pressure has been applied to travel companies and their insurers to give young couples in that position the opportunity to choose another destination?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I covered that matter in response to an earlier question. We are in the hands of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which has issued guidance to the effect that people should not travel to Mexico unless it is absolutely essential. At this point, we are not being prescriptive, because there are now more cases in the US than in Mexico. There have been approximately 8,500 cases worldwide to date, and the figure is rising rapidly. Therefore, it is sensible for people to follow clear travel guidance. Containment depends on the sensible co-operation of all individuals.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Ad Hoc Committee: Draft Private Security Industry Act 2001 (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2009

Resolved:

That, as provided for in Standing Order 53(1), this Assembly appoints an ad hoc committee to consider the proposal for a Draft Private Security Industry Act 2001 (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2009, referred by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and to submit a report to the Assembly by 30 June 2009.

Composition:

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|---------------|---|
| DUP | 4 |
| Sinn Féin | 3 |
| UUP | 2 |
| SDLP | 2 |
| Other parties | 1 |

Quorum: The quorum shall be five members.

Procedure: The procedures of the Committee shall be such as the Committee shall determine. — *[Mr Cobain.]*

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Healthcare for Older People

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

Mr Buchanan: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to reconfigure and enhance services for older people to ensure that these services are integrated, person-centred and well-staffed; that the dignity of the individual is promoted; that information is communicated effectively to patients and relatives by health professionals; that inpatients receive a nutritional diet; and that personal care is provided free of charge to all those with medical need.

I hope that the Minister will be present at some stage during the debate. I thank the Business Committee for bringing this most important of motions back to the Floor of the House. I thank the Minister for now taking his place to hear the debate.

In the past 50 years, older people in Northern Ireland have witnessed a world that has changed beyond measure. The current generation of older people has lived through the turmoil of political and civil instability as well as the arrival of new technologies and discoveries in medicine and services. Therefore, as the spotlight shines on the lives of a generation of older people who have experienced more in their lifetime than previous generations could imagine, it is important that our devolved institution picks up the challenges that face our older people, embraces the new opportunities and provides the leadership that is required to ensure that our older generation and ageing population are respected, valued and properly cared for in society.

That is why action is required to put in place measures that not only are fundamental to improving the health and well-being of today's generation of older people but will set the basic principles for tomorrow's ageing population.

12.30 pm

Estimates that Help the Aged has provided suggest that almost 240,000 people in Northern Ireland are aged 65 and over, and that number is expected to increase by 85% over the next 25 years. There is no doubt that, with people living longer, there will be an increase in conditions such as arthritis, diabetes, lung disease, stroke, osteoporosis, mental impairment, cancer, dementia, and hearing and vision loss. Therefore, access to a greater number of care services, ranging from primary, secondary and domiciliary care to community care, nursing homes and residential homes, will be

required. That constitutes a challenge to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and his Department to provide that high standard of effective healthcare, which will continue to be essential to enable individuals to manage their health and enjoy a good quality of life into their twilight years.

On 13 May 2008, the Minister announced that older people's health and well-being will be a priority in the next round of service frameworks. However, despite the many statements, strategies and policies published and standards set by the Department, and despite the good level of healthcare that is available in Northern Ireland, care of older people is not always delivered to a high standard, and the elderly are not always treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve.

In October 2008, the British Medical Association (BMA) Northern Ireland launched a policy document titled 'Improving the care of older people in Northern Ireland' to highlight how the healthcare system should relate to older people now and in future. That document included a number of recommendations, which are underpinned by the need for equity of healthcare access and for service users to be treated with dignity and respect. We would do well to examine some of those recommendations today.

A number of areas of concern prompted the recommendations, the first of which was the integration and co-ordination of services. I will be crystal clear: unless and until healthcare services are fully integrated and co-ordinated right across the Department and among the various agencies and healthcare providers, the delivery of those services for older people will continue to fail. The current situation, in which various agencies and providers all work to their own agenda, must change. They must all be united and working to the same agenda if the deserved and necessary level of healthcare services for older people is to be provided.

A second issue of concern was staff recruitment, retention and motivation. It is a well-known fact that domiciliary care workers are generally poorly paid and poorly trained. That leads to recruitment and retention difficulties, and, consequently, a high turnover of staff, resulting in a lack of continuity, which can be unsettling and distressing for older people. The recruitment and retention of skilled staff must, therefore, be a priority for the Department and all agencies that are involved in delivering care for older people. The Department must ensure that properly trained staff are in place and that they are properly paid for the job that they do with the older and ageing population.

Thirdly, care must be person-centred. For far too long, older people's views have not been sought to enable the Department to provide a care package that is tailored to meet their needs. Older people must be empowered to make informed choices about their own

healthcare packages. It is essential that the Department liaises with older people to determine their views and requirements so that tailored packages that meet their needs are put in place.

There must be clear lines of communication between healthcare providers and professionals, the Health Service and users. The information that is provided to users and their families is totally inadequate, and that must be addressed urgently. The Department must take appropriate steps to ensure that all health and social care trusts fulfil their obligations by providing adequate information to users and their families. The breakdown of communication between the Department, the Health Service, healthcare providers and families is a big concern for elderly people and their families, and that must be addressed by the Department. Furthermore, the BMA has recommended that standards of nutritional care and diets in care settings must be improved to prevent poor health outcomes.

In conclusion, it must be emphasised that personal care should be provided free of charge to older people, who have, over the years, rendered an invaluable contribution to society. Now that they are in their twilight years, it is only right that we provide them with free personal care. I have set the scene for today's debate, and I await with bated breath the Minister's response and his comments on the delivery of an enhanced service for our ageing population, as set out in the motion.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin believes that people have the right to social, economic, gender and cultural equality. Creating the conditions for establishing an equal society means recognising that many diverse groups need enhanced protection from the state. Many of the issues that must be addressed in promoting social inclusion are related to the provision of, and access to, quality services. Equal services and equal access must be given to older people in all areas of life. Discrimination in the health services that are available to people who are over 65 must be tackled.

The introduction of free personal care for all senior citizens is essential. In relation to healthcare, age should never be a pretext for not treating people with dignity. Yet, in a survey that was carried out by Help the Aged, over 50% of older people said that they expected to be accorded little dignity in a hospital or a care home. In the same survey, 50% of older people said that, all too often, health professionals dismissed their symptoms as being down to old age and, therefore, inevitable. Surely that is wrong; if that is the perception of older people, it must be changed.

Older people in the health system often have complex health needs. In the process of meeting those needs, an older person's dignity must be recognised as a clear

priority. Professional practitioners should reflect that. As has been mentioned, the British Medical Association made a number of recommendations in a publication titled 'Improving the care of older people'. It states:

"The social inclusion of older people in our society must be at the forefront of policy development, to enable all individuals to participate fully in society without fear of discrimination or disadvantage. ... Standards of care in all healthcare settings must not only be rigorously implemented, but exceeded. ... Healthcare professionals and managers must take responsibility to ensure that policies, structures and resources are in place so that elderly patients are nutritionally screened on admission and an appropriate nutritional care plan implemented. ... Cross-border initiatives that improve healthcare for older people and reduce economic and social disadvantage, which can result from the existence of a border, should be developed and implemented.

Living in a border area should not create inequities for its local population. Healthcare for older people should be easily accessible and appropriate to an individual's need, regardless of their location. Improvements in cross-border healthcare offer opportunities to improve healthcare for older people."

With respect to mental-health matters:

"The Bamford Review recommendations must be implemented in full."

The BMA has a number of concerns:

"The lack of services for frail elderly patients ... That older people should have equal access to specialist treatment and be treated with respect and dignity ... That older people are discriminated against in the provision of national health services".

The Minister:

"has an ultimate responsibility to ensure that adequate resources exist to enable those in care homes to be properly cared for".

I ask the Minister to confirm:

"The delivery of older people's healthcare services must be fully integrated and seamless across and between agencies ... The recruitment and retention of adequate numbers of skilled staff must be made a priority for all agencies involved in delivering care ... Older people's care must be person-centred, and person-centred care must be a key element of the Service Framework for Older People's Health and Wellbeing ... Communication between all healthcare providers should be improved, including the provision of more effective training in communication skills for staff ... Models of care should be tailored to an individual's need and free to all those who need it."

That includes personal care. In addition:

"Support for carers must be increased as a matter of urgency, due to the excessive burden placed on informal carers as a consequence of inadequate funding of community care."

I ask the Minister to consider all those issues, because society owes a debt of gratitude to its older people, and we must ensure that they are treated with dignity and respect in all areas of their lives. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr McCallister: Here we are again; after thousands of questions for written and oral answer and many more debates than any DUP Minister has responded to, we are back discussing a DUP motion on health. Devolution

has been restored for two years — two years in which the DUP had opportunities to raise these issues. Yet, here we are, in the middle of a swine flu outbreak, having this debate, unrelated, I am sure, to the European election campaign. Is the Health Service in a major crisis? It probably would be if Peter Robinson's draft Budget a couple of years ago had got through unchanged. The Health Service is not in crisis. It is being run and reformed well by an Ulster Unionist Party Minister, yet the DUP continues to snipe. Indeed, it could be reasonably argued that the DUP protests too much.

Thankfully, the press and media in Northern Ireland are too discerning to pick up on the nonsense that the DUP press office pushes every week. Maybe that is because they know that the Health Minister is doing a good job and that efficiency savings have been forced upon him by the DUP — the same DUP that attempts to mislead people about the savings that the Minister is making.

The motion calls for free personal care for elderly people. In 2005, my party launched a policy document that called for the same thing. We are committed to free personal care for elderly people, because we understand that the welfare state should mean care from the cradle to the grave. The Minister's phased abolition of prescription charges highlights the UUP's ability to make, and deliver on, firm policy commitments.

Although we are committed to free personal care for elderly people, the fact remains that Nigel Dodds, like Peter Robinson before him, must decide whether he wants to pay for it. Consequently, the real question for members of the DUP, including Mr Buchanan, Mr Easton and Mrs Robinson, is whether they are actively lobbying the Finance Minister for the resources that are required to deliver on that commitment.

The public knows that the UUP is committed to health and to following through on policy promises, and that the DUP is the party with the ball in its court when it comes to money. The DUP must stop its crocodile tears and false outrage and begin to take seriously its responsibilities on financing health. Motions such as this achieve nothing. Care for older people in a Health Service that needs reform must be handled sensitively.

It is estimated that, in the next 40 years, the proportion of the Northern Ireland population over the age of 65 will almost double. That creates challenges for the Health Service, and it comes with proportional increases in conditions such as arthritis, dementia, and hearing problems, to mention but a few.

12.45 pm

The Northern Ireland single assessment tool, which the Minister of Health launched in February 2009, will go a long way to ensuring that the treatment of older people is more streamlined and efficient as the number

of people needing treatment rises. It will ensure that their treatment is sensitive to the individual's particular needs and that information will be collected only once.

Care homes are also crucial to the care of older people. Many Members will have been inundated, as I have been, by constituents who are concerned at health trusts' recent plans to close care homes. In my constituency, Slieve Roe House in Kilkeel was under threat from the Southern Trust, as was Skeagh House in Dromore. Members will be as pleased as I am that the Health Minister is committed to the quality care that those homes provide and to keeping homes open unless a suitable equivalent facility is available. Both Slieve Roe House and Skeagh House were saved, as were many other care homes across Northern Ireland.

The Minister's actions have shown him to be committed to care for the elderly and to the quality provision of health services for everyone in Northern Ireland. Frankly, the DUP's actions and words paint a very different picture.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr McCallister: We know that during this election campaign and the public engagement that goes with it, the public is glad that the Ulster Unionist Party is safeguarding the Health Service from the DUP's so-called efficiencies.

Mrs M Bradley: Dignity, respect and equitable value and treatment are the key words that echo through any article or research piece that pertains to our older people. However, today's society, and sometimes even our Departments, have trouble applying those terms when dealing with older people in our community.

The motion calls for the older person to be at the centre of any and all decisions that concern their health. I was approached recently by at least two people who, during hospital stays, shared wards with older people. They were highly concerned with the treatment — or rather the lack of treatment — that those older people were being given. The younger patients were so appalled by that treatment that they fed the older people and had to help to lift them in and out of their beds.

It appears that if older people are unable to feed themselves, they simply do not eat. Breakfast and dinner trays are left on a table at the bottom of the beds of those patients who are unable to walk. That is neither acceptable nor humane. It is becoming clear to me that in many general hospitals, the pattern seems to be that if someone is old, they are a burden, but if they are old and infirm, they are forgotten.

It is not a crime to be old. It is inconvenient, if not demoralising, for the older person to ask for help in the

first instance. I stress that it is not the nurses' fault — they are under a lot of pressure. The fault lies with a bureaucratic system that has forgotten that there are human beings — in these cases, older human beings — at the end of the red tape. They are suffering day and daily for the sake of administration. The abundance of administrative work makes it difficult for nurses to do the real job of nursing. Today's nurses are professional carers, and it is shameful that health trusts are using such staff to do paperwork.

The Public Accounts Committee commissioned the report 'Older People and Domiciliary Care', which was printed just over a year ago. The Committee said that a survey that the Comptroller and Auditor General carried out illustrated:

"there is scope for the Department to be more proactive in seeking the views of older people so that their needs and wishes can be central to decision making."

I am very interested to know whether that recommendation was ever taken on board, and, furthermore, whether it was put into practice.

Older people are not androids who can be shifted from pillar to post. They should not be made to settle for second best just because they are older. We all age, some of us better than others. Until last year, the Assembly was led by an octogenarian. However, I am horrified constantly by some of the stories that are brought to my constituency office. Our older people are crying out for equality in health, in society and in employment.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister gave us a glimmer of hope in December 2007, when it finally announced its intention to create the post of commissioner for older people. However, that has never come to fruition. We were told that the interim post of an advocate would not delay the creation of the role of a commissioner proper, but, alas, it appears to have done just that.

The objectives outlined in the motion are optimal for providing good and basic care for older people. The practice of transferring trust establishments to private enterprises, which was used in the past and is used currently, is not a good one. I am particularly mindful of the Waterside Hospital in my constituency, which is a purpose-built hospital for older people who cannot remain at home and require round-the-clock care. That unit will also undergo a change of usage, which, I hasten to add, was decided without consultation.

How can the Department be serious about providing a quality care package when it is closing the very units that are ideal for providing such a service? Privatisation of healthcare facilities is not a good idea and will not, in any way, help us to reach the position that is called for in the motion. As I have said in every contribution that I have made in the House on issues pertaining to

older people, Wales has got it right; its strategy is already in its second phase, and it is working.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has been trying hard to deliver, in spite of a very optimistic Budget. My party voted against that Budget, because we knew that it did not deliver on the Programme for Government commitments. Our older people deserve proper treatment and a dignified life.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Mrs M Bradley: They were the people who kept Northern Ireland on its feet, and it is our turn to support them. I support the motion.

Mr McCarthy: My party and I are happy to support the motion. We would be extremely angry if the issues in the motion — such as respect and dignity for patients, the provision of good food and information, and the provision of person-centred and well-staffed services — were not being implemented, with our elderly and infirm patients suffering as a result. I am concerned that the fact that the Assembly is discussing health provision for the elderly means that there may be instances of that happening.

A recent report from the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) showed that some institutions were falling far short of what is required; problems related to a range of issues, including care, staffing, record keeping, and the administering of medicines. That is deplorable and should not be tolerated under any circumstances. Such findings prove the need for a full-time commissioner for older people; the sooner that position is filled, the better.

In its report 'Improving the care of older people in Northern Ireland', the BMA acknowledges that the care that is available is not achieving the outcomes that it should and proposes 11 recommendations, four of which are detailed in the motion. I draw the attention of Members to the last paragraph of the report's introduction, which states:

"If local policy makers are serious about improving healthcare for older people, then action is needed now."

The "local policy makers" are us, and I sincerely hope that we, as a local Assembly, will rise to that challenge.

I am glad that our Health Minister, who is present, recently stated his commitment to ensuring that the elderly are treated with dignity and respect while they are in receipt of any healthcare. That was an encouraging statement, and it is the bottom line. Everyone must ensure that that commitment is fulfilled and that the days of horror stories are over and will never return.

Turning to the final sentence of the motion, I am delighted that free personal care will become a reality. After the motion is passed, we expect the Finance Minister to provide the funding for that very important

provision. The Assembly can end the misery of those elderly people who have to sell their homes to pay for personal care at a time in their lives when they are unable to cope.

On 27 February 2001, I and the current Finance Minister, Nigel Dodds, asked the Assembly to implement in full the report that was prepared by the Royal Commission on Long Term Care, known as the Sutherland Report, which would have meant the introduction of free personal care.

That was unanimously agreed by the Assembly. However, in June 2002, my amendments to the Health and Personal Social Services Bill were rejected. The then Sinn Féin Health Minister and the Health Committee had no funding and the time was not right — any excuse to say no.

In May 2007, our colleague Carmel Hanna tried unsuccessfully to introduce free personal care; again, no funding was the excuse. Now that the DUP and Sinn Féin are in control of the purse strings, we expect the necessary funding to be provided, especially as the motion was tabled by a DUP Member.

I remind Members of comments that were made by Nigel Dodds on 27 February 2001, when he said in a debate on care for the elderly:

"No Member would ever argue that, because cancer treatment was becoming more and more expensive, we ought not to treat people." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 9, p317, col 2*].

That comment is as relevant today as it was then, except that the Assembly did not then have the power to implement the will of its Members. Today, it has that power, and we now expect the necessary funding to be given to the Health Minister to carry out the will of the Assembly.

I want to put on record the Alliance Party's thanks to Age Concern, Help the Aged, the age sector reference group, and the many other groups for their excellent campaigning over many years.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr McCarthy: We want and expect the Assembly, if the motion is agreed today, to put the funding in place so that free personal care can be achieved in the very near future.

Mr Shannon: There is a well-known saying that a society is judged by how it treats its vulnerable members, and I agree with that. One category of vulnerable people is the older generation, who have contributed so much to our lives and who have moulded the world and how we live in it.

Ivryboadie hes bein effected bae sim aulder boadie laike members o' oor ain femmelies ir neebors an we hae aa hed sim blessin' i oor lives oan account o' thon.

Hit isnae jist doon tae the fect at Ah'm noo a croose gran' faither masesel an at sim fowk nicht alloo at Ah'm movin intae the aulder bracket. Ah'm stannin theday accause A hae respect fer thaim at hae lived thair lives waarkin an' leukin aboot ither fowk an noo hae need fer the wee bit o' care an respect at bes due tae thaim.

We have all been affected by the input of someone older than ourselves, whether it be a family member or a neighbour, and we have all had some blessing as a result of that input. I say that not simply because I am now a proud grandfather myself, and, some might say, starting to move into the older bracket. I say that because I have respect for those who have lived their lives working and taking care of others, and who now need the little bit of care and respect that is due to them.

According to a British Medical Association survey last year on the care that was provided to older patients, eight in 10 doctors believed that healthcare services for older people were not good enough. Those are not my words, but the words of the survey. Only one in 10 doctors believed that the NHS spent enough money on care for the elderly. About 500 GPs, consultants and staff-grade doctors responded to the survey.

The biggest concern was the lack of services that were available in the community, with only 8.1% feeling that activities that were provided in residential and care homes to maintain mental agility and physical exercise were adequate; some 62% thought that there were not enough services to support people with dementia, and just over 33% said that older people have continuous access to podiatry services.

That is why it is time to focus services more specifically on older people so that centres are well equipped and staffed. The motto of the Health Service should be to promote the importance of care services for older people; if that were the central theme, delivery would soon follow.

I have, for some time, advocated a direct-payment scheme that allows older people to choose how to allocate their budget and meet their care needs. What has been surprising is that there has been only a small take-up of the scheme. What steps can the Minister take to ensure that the scheme is more widely known about? The scheme would definitely help people to get what they need rather than accepting something less that does not always completely meet their needs. There must be a way of ensuring better knowledge and take-up of the scheme, and that is something that the Minister and his Department could address.

It is of the utmost importance that the dignity of the individual is promoted. I get frustrated and angry when I see how elderly people are often brushed aside and ignored because of their age. I am sure that I am not the only person to have heard people making derogatory

comments about people being old and having nothing else to complain about. None of us has control over life and death, and it behoves all of us who express such statements to be aware of the fragility of life and to be aware of the fact that, some day, sooner than we care to think about, we will be in a similar position, and we would not like to be treated in the way that they are treated.

1.00 pm

People who come into my advice centre regularly tell me that information does not flow freely between patients and relatives and health professionals, and the manner in which some news is given can, at times, breed fear. That information may not always be the most palatable, and it may represent bad news, but it must be relayed. Although the information is always relayed professionally, sometimes a stark and cold approach adds to the angst that is felt. There is often a better way of doing things, and it is important that we address that issue. Older people in particular may find it harder to understand what is said to them in a clinical manner. They would benefit from someone spending time with them and explaining in detail and in everyday terms their prognosis and treatment plan.

Too often, as elected representatives, we have heard constituents saying that no one told them what was happening. That must stop. There must be a holistic approach to care. It is vital for older people to have a balanced, nutritional diet. As someone who was recently diagnosed as diabetic, I know the importance of a healthy diet. Older people have the right to receive the best care and nutrition.

We spend much time saying that there should be equality for men and women, black and white, Protestant and Catholic, but what about old and young? I support the motion.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I commend the Members who brought this important issue to the Floor of the House. I welcome the Minister's attendance. Last week, I criticised him for being elsewhere during the swine flu outbreak, but he is here now, and I commend him for that. It is important that the Minister, as the boss of the Health Department, hears at first hand the issues that we raise.

Members who have already spoken highlighted strategies and recommendations, so I do not propose to go over that again. I am going to ignore the opportunity to get involved in an election fight between the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party because we need to bring some reality into the debate. Jim Shannon rightly pointed out that, every other week, we talk about how we as a society will be judged on how we treat our most vulnerable citizens, whether they are children, young people, the elderly or people with disabilities.

We, as a society, will be tested on that, and we need to show that we want to make changes.

With that in mind, I thank the Assembly's Research Services for the information that it provided to us for the debate. Mary Bradley mentioned last year's Public Accounts Committee report on older people and domiciliary care. A number of important points struck me when looking through the research papers. In 2005-06, trusts spent more than 60% of their money on residential or nursing home care, but the overall number of people who received those services fell. That is an important issue. Will the Minister provide us with more up-to-date information on that? The motion calls on the Minister to reconfigure and enhance services for older people. The Public Accounts Committee has raised those issues with trusts, through the Comptroller and Auditor General, and we must reconfigure those services.

The Public Accounts Committee also stressed the importance of more careful planning of discharges from institutions, including hospitals, and the need to ensure that an appropriate package is in place. We can all relate to that. Every day, but particularly during the winter months, there are delayed discharges from hospitals, because the proper care package is not in place for patients, most notably for elderly patients. There must be seamless links among hospitals, trusts and society.

I hope that we are not inundated with cases of swine flu this winter, because that would add to the problems that we already face. That brings me back to the motion. We are talking about the dignity of the individual. If that is to be promoted, we must deal with delayed discharges by ensuring the delivery of proper, person-centred care packages.

The Research and Library Services information pack also informs Members that the Department has been involved in trying to get the right services delivered to older people since the 1990s. I have no doubt that, 19 years down the line, the Department knows what services are needed. It is 2009, and we must deal with that need.

Members have spoken about carers. We are in debt to carers: we owe them a lot of gratitude because they take a lot of pressure off the Health Service. They must be commended for the work that they do for society in general and for their loved ones in particular.

I am conscious of the time. Some Members have mentioned the British Medical Association (BMA). I am struck, not by recommendations of the BMA, which were useful, but by the introduction to them from the then chairman of the BMA council, who, in 2008, said:

"Despite the high standards of healthcare that exist...the British Medical Association...is concerned that the care of older people is

sometimes deficient, despite the many strategies, policies and care standards that exist. This is unacceptable."

Therefore, like other Members, I make no apology for supporting the motion or for bringing some of the issues involved to the House or to the Health Committee, because that is what I am elected to do.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Ramsey: I cannot. I have 20 seconds left in which to speak.

Going back to Jim Shannon's point, which I want to highlight, discrimination is an issue.

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

Mr S Ramsey: In order to ensure that no one is discriminated against, the Assembly must protect our most vulnerable people.

Mr Gardiner: It is another Monday, and once more we have a DUP motion on health, the fifty-sixth, to debate. I will add little to what I said this time last week except to say that, if the then DUP Finance Minister, Peter Robinson — the husband of one of the Members who tabled the motion, who is, unfortunately, not able to be here today, Mrs Iris Robinson — had given the Health Minister the budget that he requested, there is no doubt that we could have afforded to keep parity with the rest of the United Kingdom. Such parity is proclaimed by the DUP everywhere other than in health; never mind the wish list with which the DUP regales Members every week.

The motion is a further DUP attempt to portray the Health Minister as someone who cuts services and fails to deliver. That flies in the face of the evidence. The motion mentions effective communication of information to patients. The Minister assessed the cost to his Department of free personal care and made a bid for that funding during the budgetary process for the current (CSR) period. That bid was rejected by the then Finance Minister, Peter Robinson.

The Minister is currently implementing reforms to improve care for older people while increasing the level of care provided in the community. In January 2009, Mr McGimpsey launched the Northern Ireland single assessment tool, which is a mechanism designed to assess the care needed for older people from the Health Service. The population is ageing; the over-75 age group will almost triple in the next 50 years. The Department is spending more than £600 million on our older people, the second-largest slice of the health budget after acute services. The Northern Ireland single assessment tool allows for a person-centred evaluation of people's needs to ensure that they get the right individual care packages, whether in their own home, residential homes or nursing homes. That is already happening. Other areas of the United Kingdom

have introduced single assessment processes. However, they have not developed an assessment tool to underpin those processes. Northern Ireland is unique in that it has developed a single assessment tool that is specifically designed for the health and social care system in Northern Ireland. Its use across the region will bring consistency to the assessment of older people. Despite the draconian requirements that the DUP Ministers imposed on Minister McGimpsey, he has managed to produce improvements here that are in advance of the rest of the United Kingdom. On that issue and on many others, we have an active and proactive Health Minister.

Once again, today's motion is an attempt by the DUP to blow hot air. The Minister has already proven his deep commitment to older people, as has my party. I thank Members from other parties who paid tribute to Michael McGimpsey for being an efficient and caring Health Minister. He acts swiftly when the need arises. The Finance Minister should look at the Budget again and give the Health Department the money that it requires.

Mrs Hanna: It is always good to remind ourselves of the needs of older people. We are all very aware of the growing elderly population; we have seen the figures. We are all living longer because we have a better standard of living and much better healthcare. Of course, that has huge impacts and financial implications and presents many challenges for the Health Service today and in the future.

Caring for the elderly, whether it is residential, nursing or domiciliary care, is very demanding and rewarding work. Many family members, through love or gratitude, deliver a lot of that care. We have to be aware that if the carers were not there, much of the work that they do would have to be done by health services.

As far back as 1990, the Health Department published a paper entitled 'People First'. Its key objective was to ensure that older people were able to live in their homes as independently as possible, although it recognised that some older people will always require supported housing or residential or nursing care. We are aware of the Public Accounts Committee's 2008 report, which stated that significant numbers of older people were still being treated in institutional settings. We are all aware of older people in acute hospital beds who are waiting for placements in residential or nursing homes, or, indeed, temporary care in step-down beds.

Big domiciliary care packages do not always have to be used to provide for the needs of the elderly and the very frail. Sometimes, a little support can really pay dividends in increasing a person's independence. Nowhere is prevention and early intervention more important. Since before I was elected to the Assembly, the SDLP has called for free personal care. Indeed,

before I came here, I assessed older people for domiciliary care, so I am very aware of the inequalities in the systems.

It is impossible to separate the nursing and personal care elements. However, as has been said, we have agreed to free personal care for the elderly in the past. The issue has been debated several times. Perhaps the Minister will take the opportunity to update us on a timescale and a funding stream to provide it, because that is very important.

The BMA produced a policy document on improving care for older people that mentioned several of the issues highlighted in today's motion. It goes without saying that all patients should have a care-centred package but none more so than older, vulnerable people.

1.15 pm

Special attention is required to ensure that frail, elderly people are able and willing to eat the food that is provided, whether it be meals on wheels or hospital meals, and to ensure that somebody is there to help them, if necessary, so that those meals are not left sitting on a bedside table.

As far as duplication and better communication are concerned, we all know that duplication is a waste of money and that it is very frustrating for patients to be asked the same questions over and over again.

The SDLP firmly believes in prevention and early intervention. If people have good general health and if they are encouraged to stop smoking, to limit their alcohol intake and to get more exercise, that pays dividends when they grow older. Of course, as we get older, we become more prone to cancer, heart disease, thinning of the bones and other such ailments. The new Public Health Agency will pick up on all those issues, particularly those around prevention and early intervention. People will live even longer because their health will be better. If the health of older people gets better generally, fewer NHS resources will be required to care for them, and the resources saved can then be directed to where there is more need.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want to extend a fáilte, a welcome, to the Minister. There is some discussion about whether we should have this debate, but I support our having it. It raises the profile of health provision for older people. I am reminded of a comment made by Elaine Way, the chief executive of the Western Health and Social Care Trust. She said of the recent consultation on care provision in residential homes that, whatever the outcome in any particular area, the consultation at least raised the profile of the issue, and other health professionals working in the Western Trust agreed. That is important in itself.

I spoke to somebody in the Western Trust about today's motion. That person told me that the trust is

moving towards providing an integrated service. When I looked at the website for the Western Trust, I saw that the word “integration” is used repeatedly. That is important, even in a subliminal way. There is nothing worse than older people having to go here or there to find an occupational therapist, a community nurse or any of the various health professionals who might be needed to deliver care to them in the community, as my party colleague said. An elderly person should not be in the position of not knowing exactly what their community care package will be. That point was made in the latest PAC report, which noted that community care packages are key.

An integrated service delivery team is in place in the Western Trust, which operates in my area of West Tyrone. It is early days, but that is very important. There are four service localities in the Western Trust area, stretching down as far as Fermanagh and up towards Derry, and within each there is a senior manager and three subgroups. When I talked to the health professional from the Western Trust, it was stressed to me that it is early days but that the trust is very conscious of the need for an integrated service. A number of Members made that point.

I also discussed the promotion of the dignity of individuals with the health professional from the Western Trust. That is a key issue, and it was mentioned by other Members including my party colleague Mickey Brady. It is particularly important that the dignity of the individual is promoted. Often, people who require a home help feel that they are in some way begging for help. Many of them are proud individuals who do not want to be put in such a situation. Therefore it is imperative that the dignity of the people in the community who require a home-help service is protected and promoted.

When speaking to the health professional from the Western Trust, I got the impression that the trust is aware of the need to protect and promote the dignity of individuals. It is employing flexicare. The system is in its infancy in the Western Trust, and I heard criticisms of it at an event that I attended on residential care homes. However, it is early days for the system, and it is hoped that it will be more effective when the teething problems have been sorted out.

As regards communication, the Western Trust has learned from the consultation.

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

Mrs McGill: There are mechanisms in place to improve communication.

The Western Trust did a good job on the residential care home. Representatives from the trust went to Greenfield Residential Home for Older People and

spoke to people there, and I know that the same happened in other cases.

The debate is helpful in raising the profile of the issues included in the motion. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Dr Deeny: I support the motion. I am pleased to be speaking on behalf of the elderly, a section of our population whom I consider to be wonderful. I agree with Mrs McGill and disagree with Mr McCallister: the debate is worthwhile, if only to give much-needed public reassurance to the elderly from the House and the Minister that their health and social care needs will be met in the future.

As has been said, the elderly are an important section of our community. They have paid their way in society, and they deserve to be treated well in the future. They should not be marginalised or feel that they are going to be marginalised. As has been said, they should be treated with care and respect.

Mr Shannon talked about GPs and their concerns, and he is correct: GPs are concerned. We talk about care in the community, and that is the right way to go. However, if all sorts of patients, including the elderly, are to be treated in the community in the future, the finance to put the necessary resources in place is required. That is an important point to be made today.

Our elderly people are an important section of our patients, and, increasingly, they will be looked after in the community.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that by virtue of the fact that the motion on the Order Paper has been moved by the DUP — the governing body in the Assembly — it must have received a wink or a nod from the Finance Minister that he would provide sufficient funding to implement the motion?

Dr Deeny: I agree with Mr McCarthy. However, this debate is not the place for inter-party bickering. We are talking about the elderly, who are an important section of our community.

I feel privileged to have worked with and for our elderly for well over 25 years as a front line health professional. They still have a major part to play in society and have a lot to offer. If one listens to the elderly, one can learn from their wisdom.

It is important that health professionals are given the resources they need to ensure that they are able to work in the community to keep elderly people mentally and physically healthy, fit and active. Elderly people contributed greatly to the world as we know it.

As a healthcare professional, I find older people the most satisfying group to work with, because they express the most gratitude. Many of my patients are quite old, and they remember the days before the NHS was

established to provide free care in 1948. They are very grateful for treatment and express their thanks, and those of us who treat them like and appreciate that gratitude.

We must also remember that almost 250,000 people are over 65 years of age. Let us not forget that we are all heading in the same direction; we will all be elderly some day. Therefore, it is vital that we send out a message today that the health and social care needs of our elderly population will be met. The House, the Department of Health and other Departments have a responsibility to send out that loud and clear message today.

I mentioned GPs' concerns. I know a lot of elderly folk, and I am keen to stress that I consider some of them to be my close friends. There is concern among those elderly people — particularly when they hear of efficiency savings — that they will be left at the back of the queue and that their needs will be seen to be less important than the needs of others. Those are the people we need to reassure today.

I am also worried about community care. I have said time and again in the Health Committee and elsewhere that we need to ensure that resources are available in the community to provide the care that is being planned for the future. We need adequate numbers of doctors, nurses and carers. Other Members have mentioned carers, and it is important to incentivise people to become carers. I know people who cannot get work at present and are claiming unemployment benefit. They need financial incentives to reassure them that care work will be well paid. They also need geographical incentives because, for instance, some people who would like to be carers are not interested in doing so because they are being asked to work far from home. Elderly people want to remain and be looked after in their own homes. That is consistent across the board.

Today, the Health Department must send out, loud and clear, the reassuring message to elderly people that their health and social care needs will be provided for. The whole House should state that in no way will elderly people be sidelined or marginalised but that all of their health and social care needs will be fully supported. I ask all Members to support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Our older population is increasing. Over the next 50 years, the number of people aged over 65 will more than double, from almost 250,000 to 500,000. The number of people aged over 75 in our community is rising faster than the number in any other age group; by 2050, it will be three times greater than it is today.

We already spend more than £630 million a year to support older people — a spend that is second only to funding for acute services — and I am investing a further £60 million in this CSR period to support an

additional 1,500 older people in the community. I remind Members that that is considerably more than the budget increase that I received, which was just over 1% per annum in real terms. We are investing where we see the need.

I wish to tell the House about the significantly greater investment for older people, investment which older people deserve and which I am committed to increasing to ensure that people are properly supported to live independently and safely in the community and in their own homes. Members will be aware, however, of the struggle that I had to increase the initial Budget allocation to my Department despite rigid opposition from some in the DUP. Although I succeeded in increasing my final allocation, it still falls short of the level needed to give the people of Northern Ireland the service that they deserve. Despite denials, demand for health and social care services continues to increase right across health, social services and ambulance services. The public expect rapid access to high-quality healthcare in hospitals and in the community.

1.30 pm

Every day, I am forced to make difficult decisions because of the lack of funding. I have to deliver services to people in Northern Ireland. I have made that point many times, but, sadly, some people have taken a long time to accept it. However, during a debate three weeks ago, it appeared that the penny had finally dropped for some Members. As I said then, the DUP controls finances because the Minister of Finance and Personnel is a member of the DUP. If some of those Members are so concerned, have any of them even approached their Minister of Finance and Personnel to ask about the provision of increased funding for the Health Service, and, if not, why not? If they have, what was his answer?

Rather than acknowledging the problems that our Health Service faces, some people have criticised me for not having enough money when I have not been given enough money in the first place. That is hypocrisy. Members choose to turn serious health issues into point-scoring exercises for electioneering purposes. Cynical tactics smack of political opportunism and are totally against the principles of the Health Service, which seeks to serve the entire population equally. If Members are so outraged that I do not have the resources to fund the Health Service properly, are they prepared to stand with me and the many healthcare workers in fighting for more money?

My difficulties have been compounded by the requirement to achieve 3% efficiency savings amounting to £700 million by 2011. The Health Service can be more efficient and should always strive to spend every penny carefully. However, we are being asked to do so in a short time frame, while we are

already struggling to catch up with a massive £300 million funding gap compared with England, which will rise to £600 million by 2011. I note the comparisons made with the mainland, which many people seem, conveniently, to ignore. The most vulnerable groups in society, including elderly people, are paying for years of underfunding.

We debated a motion on the issue only a month ago, and it is astonishing that despite standing on the steps of the Building with trade unionists to demand that health should be exempt from the CSR process, some Members did a dramatic U-turn and walked through the Lobby against such a proposal. That approach has been met with disdain by many who work in the Health Service. It is time for Members to realise that actions speak louder than words.

I now turn to the motion's call to provide free personal care to those with medical needs. Members will be aware of my support for the principle of free personal care. In May 2007, that issue was the topic of a motion in one of my first debates as Minister. After that debate, I asked officials to carry out an assessment of the costs and implications of introducing free personal care and to consider a range of alternative options: excluding a person's main home from any financial assessment; increasing the level of assets and savings a person can hold; increasing personal expenses allowances; and an update of the proposal originally put to the Executive in 2002. The report concluded that it would cost over £30 million a year to introduce free personal care and significantly more to introduce alternative options.

At the last Budget, I made a bid for the necessary resources to allow me to introduce free personal care, and despite a compelling case, my request was refused. Surely that demonstrates that if the proposers of the motion were serious, they would take up the issue with their Minister of Finance and Personnel, because it was that DUP Minister who turned down the request. Nonetheless, everyone is well aware of the severe constraints on my budget, which mean that I am unable to proceed with the introduction of free personal care at this point. That will come as a great disappointment to many people, but it reflects only the extreme difficulty that we face in providing services within limited resources. Personal care, not only for older people but for everyone who needs it, is already free in a person's own home, and Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK where that is the case.

I remain committed, however, to the principle of free personal care in care homes and will keep the matter under continual review.

Despite the constrained budget that is available to me, I am determined that our services be designed and structured to meet the needs of our older people in the

most effective and efficient way possible. Ensuring that our older people are treated with dignity across the health and social care sector is more than just a tick-box exercise — it is fundamental to what we do. Dignity means care that supports and promotes and that does not undermine a person's self-respect.

In November last year, I launched 'Improving the patient and client experience', which identified privacy and dignity as one of the five standards that are central to ensuring a positive patient experience of health and social care. As a starting point, a proper, consistent and comprehensive assessment of need is fundamental to ensuring that we have a full picture of an individual's needs and that we can determine how best to meet those needs.

Assessment must focus on maximising opportunities for patients and clients to maintain an independent life where possible, and it must take account of their expectations as well as physical needs. It is absolutely vital that assessment be designed to give older people the opportunity to participate fully in their own assessment, and that is why I am investing more than £1 million in the development and implementation of a single assessment tool for older people. Northern Ireland will be the first region in the UK to use a single tool that is specifically designed to strengthen our integrated assessment process. As a result, whether in Bangor or Belleek, our older people will receive the same comprehensive assessment. As the single assessment tool is embedded in practice, I expect to hear about better assessment experiences and for people to have better outcomes that are based on independence and choice.

Above all, I want to end inappropriate institutional care for people who can, and want to, be supported to live at home. Indeed, that is already happening. In recent years, significant changes have been made to the wide range of support that is available to older people. There has been a shift away from inappropriate hospital-based care to support services that are provided in the community. We have almost eradicated bed blocking by medically fit people, who can, and should, be supported elsewhere.

The range of support service is diverse and includes assistive technology; promoting active ageing; protecting vulnerable people; responding to acute crises when they arise; providing the opportunity for rehabilitation; and supporting carers. The expansion of responsive domiciliary care services has been a central element of our response. Working closely with the independent and voluntary sectors, we have made significant strides in that regard over the past number of years. We now support more people with complex needs in their own homes than are in either residential care or nursing-home care. I have set challenging targets for the service to ensure that we continue to

build on the good work that is already being done. The continued development of immediate-care services such as rapid-response nursing and step-up/step-down beds is making a real and positive difference to people.

By providing focused intensive care in the right setting, we can avoid unnecessary admission to hospital and reduce delayed discharge. Supported living also has an important role to play. I opened Barn Halt Cottages in Carrickfergus in October 2007, and I want to see that type of development appear across Northern Ireland. I am aware that some trusts are drafting supported-living proposals, and I look forward to working with Minister Ritchie as those proposals develop. All the developments that I have mentioned show how services for our older people are changing for the better.

In order to meet our patients' needs, it is also important that we have the right number of staff, with the right skills, in the right place, and at the right time. However, I want to make it clear that the changes will not happen overnight. The process must be evolutionary and take account of the wide range of services that people want and need. We must recognise that residential and nursing homes have an important role to play when ill and vulnerable older people can no longer be safely supported in their own homes. Similarly, although we aim to reduce inappropriate hospital admissions, I recognise that there will be times when older people must be admitted to hospital for treatment. Indeed, older people occupy about two thirds of general hospital beds.

Everyone who is admitted to hospital should have access to a nutritional diet, but I recognise the particular importance of a nutritional diet for older people. Patients over the age of 80 who have been admitted to hospital are five times more likely to suffer from malnutrition than those under the age of 50, and older patients may be at greater risk of not being able to recover.

In November 2007, nursing care standards for patient food in hospital set out the level of nutritional quality that is to be achieved. Patients are screened for malnutrition on admission to hospital, nursing care plans are put in place for those who require nutritional intervention, and all patients who need help with eating and drinking are identified clearly.

Turning to the communication of information to patients and relatives, the Health and Social Care (Reform) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 places a statutory duty on Health Service organisations to involve people actively in decision-making at a regional, local and individual level. That involvement must be co-ordinated and meaningful to give people a sense of ownership of the decisions that affect their lives. In addition, the Patient and Client Council has a statutory duty to promote the provision of advice and

information to the public about the design, commissioning and delivery of health and social care. In addition, the RQIA monitors the Health Service against a quality standard for health and social care on effective communication and information. My Department has begun work already on a service framework for older people. That will see the development of standards that are designed to improve further the health and well-being of older people, reduce inequalities, promote social inclusion, and improve the safety and quality of care.

Our older people deserve the best possible care that we can provide within the resources that we have been given. I am committed firmly to improving continually the support that we provide to older people. Given that, I make no apology about the fact that I will continue to press for more resources and for better outcomes for those very vulnerable members of society. I look forward to those Members who tabled the motion supporting my making that case to ensure that more investment is made for the most vulnerable in our community.

Mr Easton: I pay due regard to the elderly population and the invaluable contribution that it makes to society. My constituency of North Down is enriched by the large population of older people, which is growing continuously. Given Northern Ireland's changing demographics and the increase in the population of older persons, this debate is particularly relevant. Now is the time for proactive planning to ensure that the values and practices that are inherent in the motion are converted into reality for the older persons of tomorrow.

Many instances of good practice can be seen. For example, in many of my constituency's surgeries, older persons and their carers pay tribute to the quality of care that they have received. My evidence for that is that a report of the Comptroller and Auditor General recorded the positive experience of many older people who use the Health Service. It is vital that we support and endorse that good practice.

However, that has not always been the case, and I take it as read that the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority ensures effective and efficient inspections. We must focus on the regularity of health provision, its reliability, and, critically, its flexibility, with the requisite level of monitoring and evaluation.

We must listen actively to our older persons. They will provide the critical information that will be necessary to ensure that our health provision is tailor-made for them and that it meets individual needs adequately. I welcome measures that the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which covers my constituency, has taken. Its planning is effective and shows a detailed examination of the future needs of our expanding population of older people. I welcome the increase in day-care admissions and the fact that

more complex surgeries can be undertaken on a day-care basis.

However, that brings with it the challenge of ensuring that domiciliary care is effective and appropriate to address the needs of older persons who are coming out of hospital. With respect to that, it is imperative that any specialist equipment that is required is offered equitably to those utilising domiciliary care.

Multidisciplinary assessments are of the utmost importance, and their timing is crucial. The evidence points strongly to the importance of early assessment, so that, at the point of discharge, the service is ready for the elderly person.

How are we to achieve health provision that promotes independence, while valuing the dignity of older people? The following areas should have primacy. We must ensure that the RQIA provides comprehensive, effective inspection. In promoting independence, we should see a shift in the direction of funding towards domiciliary care, given that people in domiciliary care should get access to the specialist equipment targeted to their assessed need. Fundamentally, we want to see early multidisciplinary assessment of older people so that there is no regression from the promotion of independence.

1.45 pm

We should go further by promoting respite and sleepover services, where appropriate, in the client's home. In these challenging times, it is important that we promote job security in the private and voluntary sector to enhance morale. Let us see effective use of the single assessment tool; it might have been a long time in the making but, now that it is here, it should be implemented rigorously. It is vital that good practice be shared and that there be effective communication across all areas of our knowledge base.

I pay tribute to the people who are termed "informal carers". In many cases, those people are the heroes, so we should support them with targeted respite. Their work promotes independence and helps people to live at home for longer.

Mr Buchanan said that we need properly trained staff to look after the elderly and that the elderly's views must be taken into consideration. Mickey Brady said that discrimination against older people needs to be addressed.

It is unfortunate that the Ulster Unionists decided to bring politics into the debate, given that we were not going to have a go at the Minister today.

A Member: You will do it tomorrow.

Mr Easton: No, we will not do it tomorrow either.

Mr McCallister complained about the motion — *[Interruption.]* Do not worry, we have Lady Sylvia's vote now.

Mr McCallister complained about the motion and its timing. If the Minister had bothered to turn up on the date on which the motion was tabled previously, the motion would have been debated before the launch of the European election campaign. The Member needs to get his facts right.

I also remind the Member that the trusts' proposals to reduce the number of residential homes —

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Speaker and I have agreed on the timings of my appearances in the House. However, those have been influenced by the international swine flu crisis, about which I made a statement an hour ago. Therefore, Mr Easton should not be able to make political capital from that point or play party politics with it, which is exactly what he is doing.

The fact is that I have responded to more debates in the House than any other Minister. I have responded to 56 debates, which is many times more than DUP Ministers. My nearest rival for appearances is Sinn Féin's Caitríona Ruane, who has responded to 36 or 38 debates. Margaret Ritchie has responded to 28 debates. The number of debates that the other Ministers have responded to is in the teens and single figures, which is where the DUP Ministers can be found. Therefore, it is very unfortunate that Mr Easton is using an issue such as swine flu to make a point and to play politics with an international crisis. He is playing politics with matters that are crucial and vital.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister for his point of order. The Business Committee fully discussed and debated this issue, and, as every Member knows, matters that the Business Committee debates are not for debate in the House.

Mr Easton: It is a pity that the Minister did not mention that it was his party that raised the issue first. That is the reality. It would be interesting to see what commitments the Minister had in his diary for the dates on which he did not turn up.

Mr McCallister complained about the trusts' proposals to reduce the number of residential homes. I point out that Mr McGimpsey is the Minister in charge of the Health Department and that it is up to him to ensure that there are no cuts made to front line services, residential homes and nursing jobs. It is up to the Minister to ensure that those cuts do not happen.

Mary Bradley complained about the treatment and underfeeding of the elderly in hospital and blamed an over-bureaucratic system for nurses' workload. Kieran McCarthy said that he supports the motion, but that he

has concerns that parts of the Health Service are not already implementing what the motion states.

Jim Shannon said that we all have family members who have been affected by the issue, and I agree with him. He also said that we should give the elderly the respect that they deserve and that he is concerned about the lack of facilities for the elderly in the local community.

Ms Sue Ramsey said that resources need to be reconfigured so that they are directed at elderly people and that the dignity of elderly people must be promoted.

Sam Gardiner complained that the DUP has tabled more motions on health than any other party, and I thank him for highlighting that fact. Mr Gardiner spoke about cuts in the money that is available to the Health Service; however, I remind him of the record investment that has been made in the Health Service.

Carmel Hanna mentioned promotion of, and early intervention for, elderly people. Claire McGill said that the Western Trust was moving towards the integration of services, and she welcomed the promotion of the dignity of elderly people. Dr Kieran Deeny said that the debate was worthwhile, and he disagreed with the Ulster Unionist Party that the issue should not be debated. He said that much can be learned from the wisdom of elderly people, and I totally agree with that.

The Health Minister said that the elderly population is increasing, and he highlighted the increase in resources that was supplied by the DUP Finance Minister. I thank the Health Minister for that. More than half the entire Budget for Northern Ireland goes to health, and the Minister needs to use it a bit more wisely. In a question for written answer, I asked the Minister whether he had raised the matter of efficiency savings with the Executive. Judging from his answer, the Minister has not bothered to raise that issue with the Executive. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to reconfigure and enhance services for older people to ensure that these services are integrated, person-centred and well-staffed; that the dignity of the individual is promoted; that information is communicated effectively to patients and relatives by health professionals; that inpatients receive a nutritional diet; and that personal care is provided free of charge to all those with medical need.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Restructuring of the Executive and Assembly

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. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech.

Mr McNarry: I beg to move

That this Assembly supports, in principle, the restructuring of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Assembly in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to update the Assembly on the proposals for the creation of an Efficiency Review Panel, as announced on 9 April 2009, and to agree to implement a review and produce a report on the issue of the number of MLAs and government Departments in the next Assembly, within the next six months.

The Ulster Unionist Party is relaxed with the amendment, because we are confident in the merits of the motion; if the House thinks differently, we shall let it choose what it favours. Our purpose is to generate a worthwhile and open debate, secure in the knowledge that a very interested public is listening.

The debate is not about the spectacle of double-jobbing, family dynasties, dubious rents or the use of office-cost allowances, although we hope that, as an inevitable consequence of direct action on our motion, an end to those controversies that highlight the issues will be in sight. Nor is the debate about MPs' expenses, food bills, rent overpay, second homes, mortgages, capital gains, manure, furniture, moats or any other example of acute embarrassment to those who have been exposed by 'The Daily Telegraph'. Such activities are a matter for another House to rectify.

However, we cannot escape putting our own house in order; the comparisons are too close for comfort. MLAs are under public scrutiny. Our motion is about reform and about workable economies of scale that are designed to combat wastage. The Assembly has moved on from the days when the Labour Government contrived to enlarge MLA numbers solely to bring in diverse groups. Those groups might have contributed, but that was then, and this is now in much better circumstances.

The Assembly feels a more settled place in which to conduct business. Even that arch-sceptic and font of wisdom Lord Morrow acknowledges the catchphrase that we are moving on, although, like many, I suspect

that he reserves the right to question the precise direction in which we are moving.

That begs the obvious question: has the initial initiative of getting us here in the first place, through my party's heavy lifting, been successful to the point that those of us who are here are prepared to move on? Are we ready to move on under our own steam and to restructure and reorganise at a pace with which the electorate can identify and support? Are we willing to act in the lifetime of this Assembly to scale down ministerial posts and reduce the number of MLAs? In other words, is that a serious proposition on which we are prepared to deliver?

Although the Assembly seems to be content to continue with British rule under devolved arrangements, I do not believe that the current Executive structure can last. I am less confident, therefore, that moving on will bring the Assembly closer to the real test of its maturity, which is the shift from an enforced mandatory coalition to a voluntary coalition. This moving on caper is all well and good when the direction is clear and not littered with obstacles and uncertainty, as has been illustrated recently in debates and votes on the economy, in heated debates on the Programme for Government and its budgetary outworkings, in stormy debates on the education stalemate, and by the fact that there is little prospect of agreement, so far, on the devolution of policing and justice.

Therefore, room should be made for us to reflect on the context of where we started, where we are now, and where we are going. We must be big enough to give due recognition to how far the institution has progressed in a relatively short time. Without the efforts of the original First Minister, the Executive and the Assembly of that time, and, indeed, without the giant step that was taken by the previous First Minister, Dr Paisley, and the stepping into his large shoes by the current First Minister, we would probably not be here. The thought of debating this motion, or any other motion, in the Assembly might well have been aborted some time ago.

That said, no one could fail to notice that as recently as Monday 11 May 2009, the deputy First Minister stepped in and dismissed proposals that the First Minister put forward for various efficiency measures, including streamlining the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), the merger of the Equality Commission, the Human Rights Commission and the post of Commissioner for Children and Young People, having fewer Departments and MLAs, and, lo and behold, the phasing out of double-jobbing. The deputy First Minister described it as "shallow electioneering".

Therein lies the problem with moving on, especially when Sinn Féin's terms and conditions clearly do not

fit in with those of unionists. The Assembly has a duty to deal with differences and to decide, urgently, how best to restore the integrity of our profession and win back large swathes of a disillusioned electorate.

Long before 'The Daily Telegraph' unfolded its graphic disclosures of goings on at Westminster, MLAs — and this affects us all — were subject to ridicule in the media, abuse on phone-in shows, which still happens, and newspaper comments such as, "It's time some politicians voted themselves out of a job", followed by, "One MLA for every 16,000 of us? We have let too many in already."

Surely, those are reasons enough for the Assembly to agree to the Ulster Unionist Party's motion and good reason to show the public that it accepts that top-heaviness is detrimental to our effectiveness. Those are good reasons to show that rather than talk the talk, we will make good on and implement the necessary improvements.

Only the motion conveys that message to the public, and only the motion calls for a review of the number of MLAs and a timescale to report within six months. The amendment fudges on the aspect of support in principle; in fact, it deletes the words "in principle" from the motion. It also shies away from a review of MLA numbers when such a review is crucial, and it removes any reference to a timescale. Is that it? Is the solution to simply put the matter off, as we do normally?

I acknowledge and welcome the OFMDFM commitment, which offers to establish an efficiency review panel to examine the Departments and to release a report later this year. It said that it would establish the panel after Easter — there is no sign of it yet — and produce the report thereafter. However, the OFMDFM proposal does not include a review of MLA numbers.

2.00 pm

Our motion is specific in relation to Departments, MLAs and timescale. In my most persuasive manner, I urge Members to reconsider the motion and the amendment carefully and to think of the electorate who voted us into the House. We are not debating actual numbers. We will do that on another day, sooner rather than later. If Members want to support the amendment, they can suit themselves. However, such a move will stop short of decisive action, which is something of which we are repeatedly accused.

Support for the motion will signal to the public that our unanimous — I emphasise unanimous — intention is to provide an opportunity for them to vote for a new-look Stormont Assembly at the next election. That is the right signal to send, and only the Ulster Unionist motion sends that signal. We are public servants who are employed by the public, who expect us to act responsibly. The people deserve no less, and, ultimately, we will all be judged at the ballot box.

I trust that today's debate will be open. Ulster Unionists will voice their opinion against the amendment and, if the House divides, will vote accordingly. Only the motion is worth supporting, and I commend it to Members.

Mr Durkan: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "supports" and insert

"improving the efficiency and effectiveness of government; recognises the need for new scrutiny and oversight arrangements in the Assembly to permanently pursue such ends; calls on the First and deputy First Minister to make a statement on their proposals for an Efficiency Review Panel; notes the review procedures set out in the Belfast Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to provide for agreed changes to the institutions, including the size and structure of the Assembly and the institutional workings of the Executive; further notes the role of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee in examining such matters; calls on that Committee to accelerate consideration of changes to the number of MLAs and the number of government Departments; and asks it to produce a report this year outlining proposals which respect the principles of proportional representation and inclusion."

Mr McNarry began by saying that he and his party colleagues were relaxed about the Assembly's decision to support or reject the amendment before going on to outline several false arguments against the amendment. The motion seems to ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide a statement that offers an update on their proposals for an efficiency review panel. The SDLP amendment also asks the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make a statement to the House on that matter.

The motion calls for a report to be produced within six months, whereas the amendment asks for a report this year, which is not much longer than six months. Mr McNarry suggested that the amendment did not outline a timescale and did not mention a report. The amendment states that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee should consider the matter and report this year. Mr McNarry said that the amendment does not address the number of MLAs. It does: the amendment specifically states that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee should introduce proposals on the number of MLAs and Departments. Therefore, all issues are addressed, and the timetable is accommodated.

We commend the amendment to the House because it is more considered and possibly more competent. We do not necessarily agree that the First Minister and deputy First Minister should make proposals on the number of MLAs. A review procedure was built into the Good Friday Agreement. Moreover, it is reflected in legislation, and supplementary review aspects were built in through the creation of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. Therefore, the amendment tries to reflect the statutory reality, the spirit of the agreement and the arrangements that are in place. We want to adhere to those proper review mechanisms.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister should not decide on the number of MLAs. The Assembly can competently address that matter through the Committee and can process the issue through a proper review mechanism under the terms of the agreement.

Remember that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have not even been elected by the Assembly, which is unlike the original Assembly. Therefore, it is not within their mandate to bring forward those kinds of issues. They have many other burdens and responsibilities, and lots of things have been promised to be delivered by that Department within months that have not actually been delivered.

I am not sure that the most positive way of promoting action on those significant issues is to remit them to the First Minister and deputy First Minister through some other panel. People want to see MLAs, politicians and parties taking a handle on those issues and not constantly handing things out to other worthies and experts. We are the people who are paid the money and the allowances and we should be working in the Assembly and using the structures that were created. If people went out of their way to create an Assembly and Executive Review Committee to deal with such matters, let us use that Committee for that purpose, rather than creating a Committee and then getting someone else to do the job. That is what the public complain about and that is what our amendment attempts to avoid.

We also recognise that it is not just the number of MLAs and Departments that must be considered. Yet again, the SDLP is making the point that improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the Government requires some new Assembly scrutiny and oversight mechanisms. We hear a lot of talk about joined-up Government, but we do not get it.

One of the things that we do not have in the Assembly is joined-up scrutiny. We do not have a Committee that has the competence of a ways-and-means Committee or Budget Committee. The Committee for Finance and Personnel does not and cannot play that role. The Department of Finance and Personnel does not play a strong role in policing the performance and practice of Government expenditure across Departments: most of its time is spent on Budget-planning matters.

The SDLP has argued for the creation of new Assembly Committees with powers, not unlike the Public Accounts Committee, to call in people from Departments and non-departmental bodies. We suggest that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee considers the establishment of a Committee that is permanently dedicated to interrogating the cost of the Government. That matter should not be dealt with in a one-off review aimed at reducing the number of

Departments, although many people would find that useful. There should be a Committee that is permanently dedicated to interrogating how much the Government and the Departments are spending on themselves. It would be better than the Public Accounts Committee, which can only look at things after the fact and tends to concentrate on secondary and tertiary budget holders. The proposed Committee would test what the Government and the Departments are doing with the big budgets and their big spending on themselves in real time.

Those are positive ideas, as is the idea of a Committee to permanently oversee capital expenditure across all Departments. We hear a lot of complaints about the effectiveness, performance and delivery of Departments. Even in the context of the headline figures for capital expenditure and the investment strategy, there are complaints about delivery.

The Assembly is supposed to be a chamber of accountability and a theatre of scrutiny and challenge. Let us use it as such, and let us equip it with the proper tools of scrutiny and challenge. That is why our motion identifies the need for new measures and mechanisms.

The SDLP does not shy away from the issue of the number of MLAs. When the Good Friday Agreement was being negotiated, we proposed constituencies with five seats. On the basis that there were 18 constituencies at the time, that would have delivered 90 MLAs. It was essentially the intervention of the British Government that led to each constituency having six seats. Some of us preferred to add 10 extra seats to the proposed 90 in the first Assembly as a way of trying to accommodate the interests of some of the smaller parties that had been involved in negotiating the Agreement. However, a model of constituencies with six seats in each was chosen. That gives us an Assembly that, in most people's estimation, is too large. The SDLP is in favour of reducing it, and has suggested ways of doing that; for instance, by reducing the number of Northern Ireland constituencies.

The Boundary Commission says that Northern Ireland should have between 16 and 18 parliamentary constituencies. If the number were reduced to 16, with five seats in each constituency, the number of MLAs would be reduced by 28.

That would give us a reasonably sized Assembly of 80 Members. If, after further reviews in Westminster, there are other reductions to the size of Parliament, the number of constituency seats here will be lower. If we continue to use parliamentary constituencies as Assembly constituencies, that will result in a smaller Assembly. Contrary to what the DUP and others alleged last week, we have put forward proposals in the past. We made those proposals during the review of the Good Friday Agreement that occurred before the

talks at Leeds Castle, and we were meant to participate in a review at Leeds Castle, but that was aborted.

We do not shy away from the issue of reducing the number of Departments. It is strange that some of the parties that make a big deal about reducing the number of Departments are in the business of increasing the number of Departments to accommodate the devolution of justice and policing. We do not need an extra Department for justice and policing; we could easily rejig our complement of Departments and still fit in a Department of justice without adding to the existing 10. Other parties have decided that they want to go above 10, because they want to use the false and dishonest excuse of bypassing the d'Hondt mechanism. They are contriving to create more Departments while pretending that they are trying to reduce them.

We are serious about reducing the number of Departments. We do not necessarily buy the figure of six that many people have proposed. When we had six Departments here, they proved unwieldy and were not competent or convincing in dealing with the range of policy interests that faced them. Furthermore, we are not sure how much accountability those Departments would be subject to in the Assembly.

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member advise the House how the SDLP voted on the establishment of a Department of justice? Is it not the case that his party supported the creation of an additional Department of justice? The SDLP did not argue for a reduction of the 10 Departments in that instance.

Mr Durkan: The Member is wrong. In an earlier submission, we made the point that devolution of policing and justice could and should be done in the way that I described. There was no reason why it should not have been done that way.

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

Mr Durkan: We recognised the way in which others were going. The amendment competently addresses all the issues that the proposer's party wanted to deal with, but does so more convincingly, more properly and in a more orderly way. The amendment ensures that the Assembly will have responsibility for the matter and does not kick it somewhere else.

Mr Hamilton: I support the motion in the genuine spirit in which it was moved. I oppose the amendment, because I remain to be convinced that the SDLP is genuinely committed to reducing the number of Departments in Northern Ireland and the number of Assembly Members, which is the thrust of the motion. That was betrayed by some of Mr Durkan's comments. I welcome the fact that we are discussing the restructuring and streamlining of government in Northern Ireland. Since the inception of the Belfast

Agreement and the bloated political bureaucracy that was born out of it in subsequent years, my party has been a lone voice in calling for a reduction in the number of Departments and Assembly Members.

Whatever reason there was for having six-seat constituencies and 108 MLAs, there was no justification for it in a country the size of Northern Ireland, just as there was never a justification for having 10, 11 or 12 Departments. There are relevant examples not too far away from here in other devolved regions. In Scotland, for example, MSP representation is significantly lower per head of population and, more importantly, there was a recent reduction in Departments from nine to six. That makes the point that a country with a population much larger than ours can function perfectly adequately with significantly fewer Departments.

The context for today's debate is provided by the motion that was moved by my party and passed by the Assembly on 19 January 2009, which called on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to reduce the number of Departments. I welcome the intention to create an efficiency review panel, which is the focus of Mr McNarry's motion.

Having had that discussion, which is culminating in today's debate, I am pleased that we have made some conversions. After being the lone voice for those years, it is gratifying to my party that there have been conversions, particularly from the parties of the two Members who spoke last. Those parties are principally responsible for the bloated bureaucracy that we are in the midst of today.

2.15 pm

I also wish to make some general points concerning the value that my party puts on driving efficiency into the heart of Government. If one looks at our record since devolution, in only two years, there have been many examples of the DUP and DUP Ministers driving the principle of more efficient Government into the DNA of Departments and agencies. I accept that we are not alone in doing that, but we are the principal drivers of that reform agenda into the heart of Government in Northern Ireland.

In particular, I am thinking of some of the conclusions of the review of public administration (RPA), including the reduction of the number of councils from 26 to 11, the creation of the performance and efficiency delivery unit, and the creation of the strategic projects unit, which is fast-tracking major planning applications. Furthermore, we have been driving the general reform of the Civil Service, including the introduction of the three-digit contact number. Those and other examples of reform are driving more efficient interfacing with the public and the more efficient delivery of public services in general.

My party takes those things seriously, places value on them and is glad to see them happening. However, that is not where it stops, nor should it be where things end for Departments or MLAs. There is a convincing case for looking at bodies such as the Equality Commission, the Human Rights Commission and other commissions, without turning our backs on the principles of equality or human rights. Although we value and cherish those principles, we do not cherish or value the need for separate commissions, and there are convincing cases for considering reducing their number in order to streamline them and save money.

We must all embrace the need to reduce the size of Government and to streamline structures in Stormont and elsewhere. When Mr McNarry proposed the motion, he said that there must be buy-in from other parties. I accept that point, but we must all embrace the whole agenda. In the past, there was posturing indicating that there would be no changes to accountability; however, we have seen changes.

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

Mr Hamilton: Margaret Ritchie has learnt to her cost — or, rather, to the cost of £300,000 to the ratepayers — that changes have been made. We must all embrace this agenda and drive it forward, because the people of Northern Ireland are looking to us and demanding that we do so. I welcome the motion and I reject the amendment.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Chomhairle. I have listened closely to the contributions thus far, and my party remains unconvinced by the motivation behind the motion and that behind the amendment.

Political parties here were recently given an opportunity to show their commitment to efficient Government. All but Sinn Féin fell at the last hurdle, because Sinn Féin was the only party that, in the interest of achieving a number of objectives, including the efficient and effective delivery of services and value for money, went for the seven-council option in the RPA recommendations. That was a test for parties. Parties around the Chamber talked about how they would reduce the number of MLAs, Departments and bodies, but when they were given the option to do so, every party apart from mine went for 11, 15 or 17 councils, and some secretly hoped that the number would remain at 26. That was all about "saving our seats".

I remember the debate in this Chamber during the Hain Assembly, as it was referred to. I left that debate, and the title that I gave it was the "save our seats" debate. I strongly suspect that when the elections are out of the road, the dust has settled and it comes to making the crucial decisions about how many MLAs will sit in the Chamber and how many Departments

and advisers there will be, etc, some of the political parties that are making strong statements today about reducing bureaucracy and the number of Departments will fall at the last fence.

Another concern that my party has about the motion relates to the issue of electioneering. Indeed, Mr McNarry referred to something that Martin McGuinness said about that matter. That is, electioneering not only with respect to efficiencies, but with respect to the removal of equality, which goes to the heart of this institution and the institutions that are built around it. This institution is built fairly and squarely on the foundations of the Good Friday Agreement.

There are still those on the Benches opposite and the Benches to my left who believe that they will hollow out the equality mechanisms of the Good Friday Agreement; that they will return to the one-party-rule system of the old Stormont; and that they will not have to share power with their nationalist and republican neighbours. Until they realise that those days are over, and that those days did not serve anybody well, particularly the communities that they represent, we will continue to have these silly debates on reducing the number of Departments under the headline of efficiency savings.

Mr Hamilton: The Member has made the same argument on previous occasions. Will he not accept that it is ridiculous to suggest that a reduction in the number of Departments and Assembly Members is in no way compatible with what he has already said? In any of those circumstances, we all accept that Northern Ireland cannot be governed in the way in which it was 50 years ago. There can still be protections for minority rights within Northern Ireland. That is not incompatible with a reduction in the number of Departments and Members.

Mr O'Dowd: It can be done, but I regret that the statement from Mr Hamilton is not backed up by actions from his party colleagues. I still strongly suspect that there are those in the DUP who believe that they will someday return to this institution in a one-party state, and they will not be protecting the rights and entitlements of the minority — “minority” is the wrong term — of communities within this society. They are not interested in sharing power with their nationalist and republican neighbours.

As long as Sinn Féin is the second-largest party in the Executive, and, therefore, the largest nationalist and republican party in the Executive, we will not accept any measures that undermine the entitlements of the Good Friday Agreement.

As regards the number of Members, 108 is excessive, but remember where we have come from and how the agreement was formatted. We are a society coming out of conflict. We have had 30 or 40

years of terrible conflict, and the reason that we have so many MLAs is to allow alternative voices to represent communities from all sectors of our society.

What price democracy? Due to the reports of the expenditure of those in the British Westminster system who are abusing the responsibility placed on them by the public, some members of the public are quite rightly asking whether they can afford those politicians. I ask this: can we afford not to have politicians? Politicians have brought normality to this society. Not all politicians are milking the system. Not all politicians are living the high life. Not all politicians entered public service out of self-interest. There are those, and I rank my colleagues among them, who have entered politics because they believe in the supremacy of politics. Politics can and should be used to bring positive change into people's lives.

We are in our first real term of the institutions that were established under the Good Friday Agreement.

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

Mr O'Dowd: Let these institutions complete their task and allow the efficiency review panel that has been established under the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to report. First and foremost, it will report on equality.

Mrs Long: I support the motion and thank the proposers for bringing it today.

As Members are aware, the Alliance Party has a wide agenda for reforming these institutions and the system of government in Northern Ireland. We have been very open and honest about that. We are on record as having sought progressive changes to these institutions, whether through designations in the voting system; moving from a mandatory to a voluntary coalition system; or making better use of the North/South institutions to bring maximum benefit to the people of Northern Ireland. The size and nature of government in Northern Ireland has to be included in those considerations.

It goes without saying that the number of Departments is a critical part of that agenda, as is the number of MLAs who sit on these Benches.

I want to address several issues. I will reflect on the contribution of the previous Member who spoke. I agree that we should all acknowledge that our current arrangements exist for a reason. Our political structure was designed to fulfil the needs of a peace process rather than to promote good and efficient government. Members need to acknowledge that. It is much harder to sustain the argument that that political structure should remain for ever and a day because of its genesis.

We have a large number of Members to ensure inclusion and proportionality. However, inclusion and

proportionality can be achieved if the number of Members is reduced by altering the number of constituencies so that there are still multi-Member constituencies. That is one option. The number of Departments can also be inclusive and proportional provided one either examines the management of government — a different level of proportionality may be required in the transition period — or puts more emphasis on the role of opposition within good government. The latter option is preferable because if those outside Government are properly funded and supported to challenge Government, that is good for all people.

The efficiency review panel has already been tasked with examining the number of MLAs and Departments, and it has been stated that it will report by the end of the year. Therefore, our only question about the motion is what it adds, apart from a month or two to the reporting time; there is little more to be gained from it. However, we have no objection to that report being published sooner rather than later.

We also have no doubt that a reduction in the number of Departments would produce financial savings; no one could argue against that. However, I am wary that the level of financial savings has, at times, been significantly overstated. I think, for example, of the scant attention that is given to the cost of division, which runs at around £1 billion per annum and is, by comparison, a black hole in the Budget. Therefore, perspective is required.

The main objective of reform of the institutions is to deliver more effective and efficient government, which we have made clear on several occasions. With the planned reduction in the number of councils from 26 to 11 as part of the RPA, it is logical that the number of Departments be reviewed. Councils will take on additional powers, including some that reside with central Departments. Therefore, there is an opportunity for efficiency. The new Health and Social Care Board and the proposed education and skills authority will also take work away from their host Departments, which presents opportunities for efficiencies.

It can be argued that 11 Departments mean that there is distribution of responsibility on many issues, which can lead to little being achieved. I could give a number of examples, but the one that exercises me also exercised the House recently: school-age childcare. A number of Departments claim an interest in that issue, but no one will take responsibility and address the problem.

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

Mrs Long: Although we support the motion, we favour a focus on the more effective and efficient delivery of good governance. It is important that we do not overstate the potential financial savings, but we

acknowledge that significant financial savings could be made.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question Time will commence at 2.30 pm. I suggest that Members take their ease until that time. This debate will continue after Question Time, and Alastair Ross will be the first Member to speak.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Aid for Peace Approach

1. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if the ‘Aid for Peace Approach’ is applied in assessment of all programmes that it funds. (AQO 2711/09)

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): The Aid for Peace approach is an evaluation methodology for examining peace-building interventions. It has been used in developing the Peace III programme and was also applied in Peace III at an operational level, as part of the monitoring and evaluation strategy. It should provide a fuller indication of the impact of EU peace funding than any previously available approach.

The lead partner of each project is taken through the stages of the Aid for Peace approach by a facilitator. It is not expected that the approach will be onerous for EU-funded projects. Although the evaluation model is not used directly in the assessment of programmes that are funded by OFMDFM, the four key elements of the EU process will be part of our decision-making. Analysing issues such as peace-building needs, how programmes address identified needs and the impacts that are being achieved is an essential and routine component of our programme and policy process.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the First Minister for his response. When did he become aware that Frankie Gallagher and other members of the UPRG had left Farset and taken up employment with another special European programme-funded body?

The First Minister: I am not aware that they have. I understood that Mr Gallagher had been involved with the CTI project, which was unlawfully stopped by the Minister from the Member’s party. Neither I nor, I believe, the deputy First Minister have been made aware of any termination of employment at the CTI project — indeed, nor should we be because it is the responsibility of the Minister from the Member’s party rather than mine.

Mr Shannon: Will the First Minister indicate how the Aid for Peace scheme will work in relation to local government? I understand that with Peace I and II

there was a relationship with local government in the allocation of funds. It is important for local government to be involved with this scheme, because it would have the avenues to the projects that might be awarded funding.

The First Minister: We should be clear that although the Aid for Peace approach is set out in the four categories that are identified under the EU process, they are probably just common sense and will be used by anyone who is assessing those projects, whether in central, regional or local government.

The first element is an analysis of the conflict dynamics and in particular the peace-building process. There is then an assessment of whether an intervention is relevant to the needs of peace-building before moving to conflict risk assessment, assessing and identifying problems and risks with which projects and interventions might be confronted. Finally, there is the peace and conflict effects assessment, examining the effects of an intervention and assessing what changes have occurred. All of those seem to me to be the sort of questions that one would need to assess in local government or elsewhere, whether one uses the Aid for Peace approach or any other approach.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Will the First Minister comment on the criticisms by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency that the Aid for Peace approach is not being evaluated properly and that impacts over a period of time need to be assessed, as well as more immediate inputs and outcomes?

The First Minister: I would be happy to have officials make an assessment and, perhaps, even to speak to NISRA about its criticisms.

No matter what Department is involved, it is important that the Government use the best methodology when making assessments of any project. If improvements can be made, it is right and proper that officials learn what they are.

Cross-sector Advisory Forum

2. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the relationship between the cross-sector advisory forum and the Economic Development Forum. (AQO 2712/09)

The First Minister: On 20 April, during my statement to the Assembly on the cross-sector advisory forum (CSAF), I made specific reference to the work of the Economic Development Forum (EDF). We are keenly aware of the valuable work that the EDF does, and it is not our intention to unnecessarily duplicate that effort in the cross-sector advisory forum. The CSAF’s terms of reference clearly state its purpose, which is to make recommendations for addressing the

problems arising from the economic crisis. That forum is rooted firmly in dealing with the effects of the economic downturn. The Economic Development Forum has a role to provide advice and recommendations to the Executive on matters relating to the development of the local economy within the context set by the Programme for Government. The EDF's remit is focused on improving the strength of our economy, even in normal times.

During the CSAF's first meeting on 6 April, reference was made to the work of the EDF. There is consensus that there will be a complementary relationship between the EDF and the CSAF. It is also worth noting that we anticipate that the cross-sector advisory forum will bring forward proposals for social welfare, as well as economic responses to the current crisis.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his response. How often has it met, and when will it report to the House?

The First Minister: I assume that the "it" refers to the cross-sector advisory forum. As I said, the cross-sector advisory forum met in April. At that meeting, we agreed that we would meet before the summer recess but, importantly, that the main work of the forum could be done through work groups that would be set up to cover a range of seven different subjects. We were looking for an input, not just from the various interests in the cross-sector advisory forum, each of whom will be asked what groups they want to be part of, but from the appropriate Ministers in those Departments.

Mr Spratt: What steps have the Executive taken to address the economic downturn?

The First Minister: Each Minister in the Executive is focused on dealing with their departmental responsibilities on matters relating to the downturn. As we have already indicated, the establishment of the cross-sector advisory forum was important in that it flowed out of a series of meetings that the deputy First Minister and I had with banks, the construction industry, energy companies, the energy regulator, the Institute of Directors and other business interests. We met the voluntary and community sector and the trade unions. We had a series of meetings, and the feedback that we received was that a body of this type would be useful.

In respect of the Member's wider question, in December, my colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel brought before the Assembly proposals aimed at helping businesses and, in particular, small businesses, as well as households in hardship, particularly in relation to fuel poverty. DETI has increased its support for debt advisory services to local people, and we have fast-tracked support services for businesses. We have also improved support services for unemployed people through the jobs and benefits

offices, and we have used capital spending in our investment strategy to support construction. The investment strategy is almost twice the size that it was in the previous comprehensive spending review period. At between £1.4 and £1.5 billion, it can fill a significant gap, because of the downturn in housing.

We have been meeting the banks, and we will continue to do that. We met a number of the sectoral interests during that time.

An update on the economic downturn is a key item at every Executive meeting. Each Minister reports on how it is affecting their Department, and the Executive consider what steps can be taken. As we approach the June monitoring round, the Finance Minister will look at that issue again and, as part of the June review, we will seek proposals for changes not only from the Executive but, because we are happy to receive them, from Assembly Members and the public.

Dr Farry: Members acknowledge that the Budget and Programme for Government prioritise the economy; however, if the cross-sector advisory forum or the Economic Development Forum recommend that either document must be recast with a different emphasis on the economy, will the First Minister and the Executive follow that advice?

The First Minister: The deputy First Minister, I and all our colleagues will take advice that we are given from experts on the economy very seriously. Let me be clear: the deputy First Minister and I did not create this body as some kind of optics for the public; the body is there to facilitate a partnership with business and other sectors of the community so that we can best respond to the economic downturn. That is what we intend to do, even if it is unpleasant and requires difficult changes.

Equality Commission

3. **Ms Anderson** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action it is taking to ensure that the Equality Commission builds confidence across all communities. (AQO 2713/09)

The First Minister: The Equality Commission's draft corporate plan for the next three years, that is, 2009-2012, was subject to a 12-week consultation that ended on 12 January 2009. The draft is with Ministers for approval. In its draft plan, a key strategic priority of the commission is to reach out to the whole community.

The deputy First Minister and I recognise that the Equality Commission must ensure that it builds confidence across all sections of the community and all communities. As the funding Department for the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is

accountable for the commission's resourcing arrangements and business activities. In that context, the deputy First Minister and I approved the commission's three-year corporate plan. Our Department must approve the commission's annual business plan. It also carries out reviews of the commission every five years or so. The next is scheduled for 2009-2010.

OFMDFM receives quarterly performance reports from the commission on its progress towards achieving its aim, objective and target, as set out in the commission's annual business plan. In turn, OFMDFM officials consider the contents of those quarterly reports and request further details as appropriate. Our officials also meet commission staff on a bimonthly basis to discuss various issues, including the outworking of the business and corporate plans. Formal meetings at senior management level take place on a quarterly basis.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the First Minister for his answer. I appreciate his recognition that the Equality Commission must build confidence across society. However, given the First Minister's stated position last week on the continuing function of the Equality Commission and other commissions, does he understand or accept that, although the SDLP may be willing to remove what it regards as the "ugly scaffolding" of equality and power-sharing arrangements, Sinn Féin is not prepared to alter or dilute those safeguards, which are for everyone in this society?

The First Minister: I will not enter into the electoral battle that is under way. I will allow others to take up cudgels on that issue.

I will make it very clear: the proposal that I and my colleagues made last week was not to abolish the issue of equality, because those matters can still be dealt with. The reality is that the plethora of commissions raises the question of whether there is value and economy in bringing a number of their tasks together into one commission. That is a matter of efficiency rather than abolition. I believe that there is a very good case for bringing together at least three of those commissions.

Mr Hamilton: Does the First Minister agree that one reason for a lack of confidence in the Equality Commission among the unionist community is the utterly unrepresentative nature of its commissioners? Given that the Secretary of State is in the process of making additional appointments, does the First Minister agree that it is imperative that the Secretary of State does not repeat the mistakes of the past and that he ensures that those appointments are reflective of the whole community in Northern Ireland?

2.45 pm

The First Minister: As the Member who asked the previous question indicated, there is a common thread: we all want those who are responsible within the

Equality Commission to be representative of the community and to work for all sections of the community. It is imperative that the commission is itself representative of the community — regrettably, the present commission is not — and that its staff are representative of the community, too.

It is very hard for the Equality Commission to preach to others if its own statistics do not indicate the broad strengths of the various communities. I think that the commission's present workforce breaks down as 34% Protestant and 64% Roman Catholic. That is clearly not representative of the community, so the Equality Commission has work to do. It would be in a much better position to go out and encourage others if it could show that it has been able to deal with that issue itself.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Member who asked the main question for her choice of colour today. It has added brightness to the Chamber, and it has reassured me vis-à-vis the Equality Commission. Does the First Minister agree that there is still a strong residual suspicion of the Equality Commission throughout the unionist community? What steps does he believe must be taken to address that deep-seated perception?

The First Minister: Ms Anderson's outfit is almost Day-Glo; I should have brought my shades into the Chamber.

The unionist community's concerns about the Equality Commission stem largely from the issue that was raised by the Member for Strangford Mr Hamilton, namely its unrepresentative nature. If someone wants to speak to the Equality Commission, they are inclined to consider who in the commission shares their broad ethos, way of life and outlook. The unionist community finds it difficult to make that kind of identification, and one can see why that is so when one looks at the statistics.

Mrs M Bradley: What additional resources have been provided to the commission? Are there any outstanding legislative amendments that the commission requires to fulfil its responsibilities?

The First Minister: The key areas in which there is a requirement for changes to be made are matters that are clearly within the scope of either the Secretary of State, who makes appointments, or of the commission itself, which makes its staffing arrangements. More than anywhere else, it is those areas in which there is a lack of confidence.

If the Equality Commission indicates to the deputy First Minister and me that there is a requirement for more resources in order to be able to pursue the kind of projects about which we have been talking — encouraging equality among all communities — we will, of course, look at that and, no doubt, have to discuss it with the Finance Minister.

Strategic Investment Board: Chief Executive

4. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an assessment of the salary of the chief executive of the Strategic Investment Board, which was recently quoted in the 'Daily Mail', and if it believes it is appropriate, or in the public interest, for any public body in Northern Ireland to be paying salaries at this level.

(AQO 2714/09)

The First Minister: The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) was conceived during the first period of devolution and was established by direct rule Ministers. The present SIB chief executive was recruited under direct rule. I understand that his terms and conditions were subject to scrutiny by the Department of Finance and Personnel and by Her Majesty's Treasury before being agreed.

Although we fully accept that the chief executive of SIB is highly paid, he is not in the top 10 of public sector chief executives, as the newspaper claimed. The Strategic Investment Board has played a key role in helping to raise infrastructure investment to record levels over the past five years. In 2003-04, only £680 million was invested; in 2008-09, the total is expected to be in the region of £1.5 billion. Not only are we achieving record investment, but we now deliver it through a coherent investment strategy that ensures that it is targeted at the Executive's key Programme for Government priorities so that it will deliver the best outcomes for all of our people.

SIB was established as a limited company with a board of directors. That enables it to operate with a degree of independence from the rest of the public sector and to recruit the skills and the experience that are needed to do the job that Ministers set for it. Many of the critical skills required to achieve the acceleration of investment effort, which is vital in achieving the aims of the Programme for Government, are simply not available in the public sector; therefore, SIB has had to look outside the public sector for scarce skills. That means that for some key jobs it has to be prepared to pay market rates, which are often considered higher than those in the public sector.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the First Minister for his reply. Does his Department have any plans to review the appointments process for executive and non-executive members of the SIB, and are there any plans to review the overall work of the SIB? Can the First Minister provide an update on the review of the investment strategy for Northern Ireland, which is part of the SIB?

The First Minister: There is a periodic review of the SIB. When I was Minister of Finance, I came to the

Executive when we were looking at the issue of asset management, the sale of assets and the SIB's role in that. I said to colleagues that it was useful to have a review of the SIB and its operations. That review is due to take place this year, and it can look at the wider issues. It is worth pointing out that the chief executive retains his salary unless he resigns or retires or a review reconsiders the role that he and others play in the organisation. Such a review would have to come before Executive colleagues.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Jonathan Ross.

Mr Ross: I am still Alastair Ross, Mr Deputy Speaker. *[Laughter.]* I notice that the other Deputy Speaker is rubbing off on you.

We should be focusing on the overall performance of the SIB, but can the First Minister offer any views on how the 'Daily Mail' came to misreport the salary of the chief executive of the SIB?

Mr Deputy Speaker: My apologies, Mr Ross.

The First Minister: I am glad that my colleague raises the issue of the 'Daily Mail', as it exaggerates and gets figures wrong consistently, not just on this issue. However, an investigation would probably find that the 'Daily Mail' had added his national insurance contribution to his salary, which would not be done with any other individual. The 'Daily Mail' does not exactly go by the lines, and, perhaps more often than any other paper, sensationalises.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh míle maith agat. Can I ask the Minister whether the increase from five to 10 days for the chairman of Ilex was cleared by any Minister?

The First Minister: I would have to speak to ministerial colleagues to see whether that was the case. As it is not the subject of the main question, it is hard for me to have been briefed previously on the matter. However, I can give an undertaking that we will attempt to establish the answer and let the Member know and perhaps put it in the Library so that other colleagues will know as well.

Cross-sector Advisory Forum

5. **Ms J McCann** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if the social economy sector will be represented on the cross-sector advisory forum. (AQO 2715/09)

The First Minister: Using the accepted definition of a social economy organisation as one that reinvests its surpluses in the organisation or community, I can confirm that a number of such bodies are included in the membership of the cross-sector advisory forum. A list of the full membership was attached to my statement to the Assembly of 20 April. That included representation from NICVA, the trade unions, the

credit unions and a number of agencies established for the public good. Since the first meeting of the cross-sector advisory forum, we have been approached by a number of organisations, including those in the social economy sector, offering support and seeking membership of the forum. I can see the value of having greater involvement, and the deputy First Minister and I are considering whether that is best done through increasing the membership of the forum or by allowing those groups to be part of the subgroups that are under examination.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat. Will the Minister outline his understanding of the role played by the social economy sector in tackling poverty and disadvantage and in promoting economic development and helping the economy?

The First Minister: I support the work of the third sector, as we call the social economy sector. I recall going to the Bryson House recycling operation, although I cannot remember whether I was Finance Minister or First Minister at the time. That operation does not require funds from others; Bryson House can do the job itself. Not only does that operation pay its way, but Bryson House now has satellite businesses that employ many people who would otherwise be unemployed. That is the type of operation that one wants to support, particularly at this time.

The danger faced by a third sector is that, although it is needed most at times of economic downturn, it has difficulties in getting resources because of the requirement on it to get its funds beyond the public sector. Therefore there is a conflict between its position and the needs of society.

I support the third sector, and I want to hear from it. The deputy First Minister and I have met representatives of the third sector at sectoral meetings. It has a part to play, but we have to gauge whether that would be best played at the plenary meetings or through the working groups.

Mr Moutray: Will the First Minister provide a brief account of the groups that are represented on the cross-sector advisory forum?

The First Minister: The cross-sector advisory forum is a representative body — I almost said that its membership was like that of a civic forum. In fact, it might be a good substitute for the Civic Forum. Its representatives will have direct contact with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, and it is considerably cheaper than the Civic Forum.

The groups involved include not only the trade unions and the farmers' unions but representatives from voluntary and community groups, professional organisations, energy companies, the energy regulator, our four banks and business and construction industries. It is, therefore, a representative body that

covers all the areas in which there are concerns in the current economy.

Dr McDonnell: How will staff be recruited to the cross-sector advisory forum? Will there be an open and transparent recruitment process, or will it be a mere coalition of the willing?

The First Minister: I am encouraged by the fact that a number of sectors want to be involved in the forum, as it shows that the community wants to play a part in getting us out of the present economic downturn. The staffing of the cross-sector advisory forum will be done in OFMDFM at no additional cost. It is not possible to have Members on the forum, but we have established the seven sub-working groups that will deal with the seven areas of activity that I outlined in my statement to the House some weeks ago. It is possible that the Ministers who are dealing with those areas of responsibility will be in membership, and we have invited each of the people on the forum to choose which of those subgroups or how many of them they want to be on. There may be room for other organisations to play a part in the sector that best relates to their area of interest.

We do not want it to be a long-term body; it has been established to deal with the current economic crisis. The question for oral answer that was asked by Mrs Kelly the Member for Upper Bann related to the fact that there is a body that, in normal circumstances, can look at these business areas, and we do not want to take away responsibilities from it. The cross-sector advisory forum is here for the temporary emergency, and therefore I hope that its life will not be long.

3.00 pm

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Rural Childcare

1. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the implementation of the findings of the rural childcare stakeholder group. (AQO 2731/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Shortly after I took office, I established the rural childcare stakeholder group, and I was pleased to present its report 'Rural Childcare: Investing in the Future' to the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people last year. The report contains a number of recommendations for my Department, as well as some cross-cutting recommendations.

As a working mother and a rural dweller, I know at first hand how important it is to have access to affordable, accessible, good childcare. I am keen to play my part so that more rural families have support to allow them to consider taking up work or training opportunities. My officials are finalising the details of a rural childcare programme, which is anticipated to open for applications early this summer. That programme will be funded from my Department's rural anti-poverty and social inclusion framework, which will spend £10 million addressing poverty and exclusion in rural areas.

My officials are working with other Departments on the other recommendations for rural childcare as part of the development of the rural champion concept and the rural White Paper. Work is ongoing to ensure that the rural aspects of childcare are taken into account by, for example, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in its work on examining childcare across the North, and the Department of Education in its early-years strategy.

I will continue to advocate the needs of rural children, in particular, through my membership of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. I asked the question in the context of matters arising from child poverty. Is the Minister considering issues such as transport, which is one important factor that has been raised? Moreover, has the issue of school-age childcare been resolved, and are any discussions ongoing on that matter?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: There are five priority areas in our rural anti-poverty and social inclusion framework, one of which is rural transport. Access to good, affordable childcare in rural areas that helps people to take up employment or training is a route out of poverty, and, as such, it is very important that we provide childcare that reflects the specific needs of rural dwellers. For example, people may have long distances to travel, so childcare providers must open early and be flexible for parents who do shift work, and so on. We need to ensure that rural dwellers have as equitable access to services and opportunities as urban dwellers.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her response. She obviously recognises the importance of childcare provision in the rural community. Does she feel that her Department should ensure that there is parity of provision between rural and urban areas?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: One reason that I initiated the rural childcare stakeholder group is that it is clear that there is no parity of provision for rural children. We must recognise that for a private childcare provider, one important element in determining whether a business will be successful is the critical mass that it has to

draw upon. Therefore, what is suitable in Camlough will not necessarily be suitable in Tullyreagh. We need to ensure that the Government help, where possible. That is why we are rolling out a number of pilot projects to try to address the need in rural areas that might not otherwise work. We recognise the difficulty that exists and the geographical area that a rural childcare provider must cover when trying to make a business work.

Mr Burns: Does the Minister agree that although several childcare strategy documents have been published over the years, we have not seen enough improvement on the ground, especially in rural communities?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I said at my first meeting with the childcare group that we should not try to reinvent the wheel, but should look at other childcare reports that had previously been commissioned, draw on those experiences and try to keep our project time limited.

It was very clear that although there may be some difficulty in accessing childcare in some urban areas, no specific study of rural provision had been carried out. I felt that I, as Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, should use the opportunity to ensure that children and parents in rural areas can access childcare and that they are not disadvantaged in relation to their urban counterparts.

That was one of my first areas of work when I became Minister, and it was an opportunity that I did not want to waste.

Farm Modernisation Scheme

2. **Dr W McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when farmers will be told if they have been successful with their applications for the farm modernisation scheme. (AQO 2732/09)

17. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the farm modernisation scheme. (AQO 2747/09)

18. **Mrs O'Neill** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline progress on the farm modernisation scheme; and when letters of offer will be issued. (AQO 2748/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will answer questions 2, 17 and 18 together.

After initial concerns were expressed by the European Commission about the basis for the allocation of funding to applicants under the farm modernisation programme, the Commission confirmed that it is not for it to determine, at this stage, whether the selection criteria have been established in conformity with

European legislation and further confirmed that it will proceed to release funding for the programme. Therefore, I confirmed on 2 April that the first tranche of the programme will proceed along the lines originally planned.

Applications are being assessed by the managing agent for the programme, and I am pleased that the process of issuing letters of offer to successful applicants, and giving notification to unsuccessful applicants, has commenced. I expect approximately 1,100 successful applicants for the £6 million funding that is available under the first tranche of the scheme.

Dr W McCrea: I am sure that the Minister accepts that farmers need certainty on this issue, especially in light of the recent press coverage. She has said that letters have started to go out to the farmers. Will any farmer who posted an application form for the farm modernisation scheme receive funding from the first tranche of money?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: A number of applicants will have posted their applications. Until each application has been assessed, we cannot determine the exact number of postal applications that will be funded. However, by way of illustration, for every 1,000 applicants funded, 268 will be postal, which means that about one quarter of the applications, or 26.83%, will have been received by post.

Mr Ford: I have no desire to rehash the issue of the first tranche of funding from the farm management scheme. However, given the difficulties that arose from that scheme, and the issue of ongoing European funding, will the Minister give some reassurance to those who have lost out in the first tranche that there will be an early second tranche, and that they will have a meaningful opportunity to reapply?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: We had always intended to open the second tranche no earlier than next year. The second tranche will not be open for the next 12 months. We want to learn lessons from the initial tranche and to ensure that we have a more robust mechanism, which people will be happy with. I was upfront in my request to my partners to help us to find a way to deliver on that, and the same situation applies. I look forward to hearing the views of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on how we should proceed.

Farmers know that if we can fund only around 1,100 applicants out of the first tranche, many more will be disappointed than will be happy, because we had more than 9,000 applications. Our economy has been given a great boost by the fact that so many farmers are willing to invest a lot of their own money to modernise their farm businesses.

Mr Dallat: The Minister is far too young to remember the long dole queues of the 1950s. However, does she agree that that was no way to treat farmers, and that they would have been much better off back on the farm, milking Daisy? Will she assure Members that farmers will never again be asked to stand in queues, clutching application forms, for money that is rightly theirs?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I have been very open. I did not want farmers to have to queue to submit their application forms. It was perceived that farmers were queuing up for a handout, which was not the case. If every farmer had arrived on the same morning and formed a queue, they would all have been dealt with by lunchtime. All 9,000 applications were processed in a morning, with very little difficulty. It is commendable that staff in the DARD Direct offices were able to process those applications and that it was done with little fuss and great good humour across all nine offices. However, lessons have been learned from the first tranche.

I do not remember the dole queues of the 1950s, but farmers were not queuing up for money under the farm modernisation scheme. They were submitting application forms, and the selection criteria had already been established. There was some disingenuous reporting of the process.

Mr Savage: Have the EU authorities given any assurance that there will be no financial recall due to the selection criteria?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: It is not helpful to speculate about disallowance. There is the possibility that any scheme could be subject to an EU audit at some time, and, therefore, there is always a risk of disallowance. However, we can offer a strong argument that we have met all the EU legislative requirements and that we have taken a belt-and-braces approach since 17 February. Stringent measures have been taken to ensure that no auditor could find fault with the process. We wanted to be in a position to issue letters of offer as early as possible and to let farmers know whether they had been successful in the first tranche.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

DARD Appeals

4. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if there are any plans to review the appeals system available to farmers. (AQO 2734/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The issue of DARD's appeal process has been raised before, both in the Chamber and at the Committee. Due to the concerns that were raised earlier this year, I commissioned my Department to

initiate a review of its review processes. A scoping study is being completed, and I hope to have the results of that exercise soon.

I have always advocated that farmers and rural dwellers have a right to seek a review of my Department's decisions. I want to ensure that the outcome of the review will provide farmers and rural dwellers with access to an appeals system that is fair, objective, transparent and independent. That will ensure that the review process has delivered our obligations under both EU and domestic legislation.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for those comments, and I appreciate the review that is ongoing. Does the Minister agree — indeed, does her reply indicate — that the current system is not fair, objective or independent?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Given the House's level of concern about the matter, I thought that it was incumbent on me to bring forward a review to assess whether there is anything that we can do to make the process more favourable for farmers. The Member would expect me to do that in my position. We will look at the process and ensure that it is the best that it can be for farmers and rural dwellers.

Mr Poots: Would the Minister care to comment on Lord Justice Weatherup's review of a number of appeals? Lord Justice Weatherup has overturned an individual case, which could affect the other 1,100 farmers who had been disallowed. Will she say clearly that those 1,100 farmers will not have to go through an arduous process and that they will get the money that is rightly theirs, as defined by this country's court of law?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Member will know that the applications were dismissed in two of the four cases that were referred for judicial review. Therefore, penalties will not be refunded in those two cases. I can confirm that the two cases that Justice Weatherup referred back to the external panel have been finalised and that the farm businesses involved have been excused of their penalties.

Although that satisfies the requirements of the judgement, my officials have been actively engaged with legal advisers to consider the outworking of the judgement. Those discussions have taken longer than expected, but I understand that proposals on the options for the handling of other duplicate-field cases are being prepared and should be with me shortly. The proposals will need to be discussed with industry representatives and the Agriculture Committee before any final decision can be made.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. I find it difficult to accept that the Minister overruled the appellants' cases, and the

independent panel's support for farming, in favour of the establishment. The Minister obviously should have some understanding of what that loss of finance will mean for farms. Does she not agree that her failure to accept the panel's decision is a snub to its members and their ability to sit in judgement on appeals? How many times has the Minister overruled the panel's rejection of appeals?

3.15 pm

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Member knows that there is a statutory basis for the review of the decisions that have been through the appeals process. The outcome of any appeals system is to ensure that the right decisions are made. Until the review of the current processes is complete, I am in no position to determine whether any appeals decision under a revised process will be binding on the Department. The appeals panel exists to do a job. I am not able to overturn its decisions; I can only ensure that the proper procedures are carried out. There is a lack of understanding of my role in the process.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Flooding: Contingency Plans

6. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to the flooding events last summer, (i) what contingency plans the Rivers Agency has in place; and (ii) to detail the lessons learned. (AQO 2736/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Having witnessed the extent of the flooding at first hand, I am well aware of the impact that the extreme flooding event of last August has had on people's lives and property. Climate change is likely to make such extreme events more common. It is important for the Government to collectively provide a co-ordinated response to minimise the impact of such events on society. Although the response to the flooding of August 2008 gave clear evidence of a collective response by the Government, nevertheless, lessons can be learned.

The Rivers Agency, which is an executive agency in my Department, has an important role to play in flood-emergency planning, and it has a well-structured process that is co-ordinated with Roads Service, Northern Ireland Water and other responders. The agency's suite of emergency plans is tested and debriefed regularly. Debriefing following events such as the August flooding are fed into the emergency planning process.

Last August, early co-ordination in anticipation of flooding, along with the response itself, undoubtedly prevented damage at many locations. Nevertheless, the agency has identified lessons to be learned and is taking action on them. Those include the Rivers Agency's recently introduced flooding incident line that provides a single point of contact for people seeking assistance. The Rivers Agency has offered to supply sandbags to each of the 26 district councils, to be stored close to areas known to be at risk from flooding.

Promoting awareness is also vital to the management of flood risk, and the launch of the strategic flood map in November 2008 enables householders and businesses to find out more about the areas prone to flooding and to take appropriate action.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Minister has outlined in detail what has happened since last year. Will she advise the House about the actions that the Rivers Agency has taken to prevent similar occurrences to those we witnessed during last year's flooding? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: In the aftermath of the flooding of August 2008, the Rivers Agency undertook extensive maintenance and repair works to restore the operation of the drainage network in the areas affected adversely. Initial investigations into the flooding were also undertaken, and they indicated that 900 properties at numerous locations were affected by flooding from rivers. Where a solution is considered viable, further detailed investigations are being commissioned and additional funding is being sought for new projects to be included in the Rivers Agency's major works programme.

Mr T Clarke: I am appalled by some of the things that I am hearing about the reviews and what is taking place. It came as no surprise to me, when the Rivers Agency made a presentation to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, that it inspects some rivers only every two to three years. Debris is still lying in and beside the Six Mile Water where properties were flooded. The Rivers Agency has not cleared that debris. What will the Minister do in relation to it?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: In many cases, the responsibility for keeping watercourses clear is that of the riparian landowner. There should be no confusion about that. However, the Rivers Agency has worked on issues and has taken action in the past because it believes that the actions of others may lead to a flooding incident and that preventative action is needed.

The Member is welcome to write to me and I will respond on the specific case of the Six Mile Water. We want to work with elected representatives and the public to try to prevent incidents of flooding. However,

the resources of the Rivers Agency are finite and it has planned major works. The agency cannot be responsible for maintaining rivers outside its responsibility and it has no budget for keeping watercourses clear.

We must be clear as to whose job it is to keep certain rivers clear. We will not be found wanting when it comes to meeting the Government's responsibilities, but landowners have to meet their responsibilities. I ask that they work with us to keep watercourses free from debris and to ensure that actions are not being taken that could lead to a flooding event during the next heavy rainfall.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give a specific update on the measures being taken to prevent the River Halfpenny from flooding neighbouring homes in the Knockramer Meadows area of Lurgan as it did last year?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I do not have that information with me. The Member has corresponded with me about that issue and I am happy to provide her with an update in writing.

Rural Tourism

7. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment about promoting tourism in the countryside. (AQO 2737/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I have accompanied the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to the North/South Ministerial Council in tourism sectoral format on three occasions. At those meetings, we agreed with our counterparts in the South a number of actions to promote tourism on the island of Ireland and not just in Fermanagh. Obviously, one would expect me to get plenty of spake in about the potential for rural tourism and what it can do for the economy in rural areas.

In addition, my officials have maintained ongoing contact with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), Invest NI and the NITB (Northern Ireland Tourist Board) throughout the implementation phase of the programme. It was through those contacts that my officials were able to agree with DETI and the NITB that up to four self-catering units could be funded providing that planning permission was in place before an application was submitted. That was important to the programme. Farmers are very interested in developing self-catering units as potential farm diversification projects. It is a good example of how closely officials have been working together, and I thank all those involved.

Originally, there had to be a minimum of four units; however, we have identified that it is OK to proceed

with up to four units. Again, I emphasise that it is vitally important that Departments and agencies work together to ensure that synergies are developed between the various programmes so that we maximise the effect that funding has in rural areas.

Officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and other Departments and agencies have met representatives of the joint council committees to discuss the tourism elements of their strategies. Recently, DARD appointed a senior official to sit on the DETI steering group that is considering the development of a new tourism strategy for the North.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for her response. Given the current exchange rate, will the Minister and her Department encourage even more rural tourism in Northern Ireland? Will she also encourage the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland to promote rural tourism in Northern Ireland even more?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I was doing that long before I became the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Some beautiful parts of the country are being vastly under-exploited when it comes to tourism. We are funding tourism measures through the rural development programme, and I am keen to hear from council clusters about any difficulties they are having in getting match funding. I want to be able to help to free up the money that is needed to match some of those projects.

I believe that rural tourism is vastly under-exploited and that a huge number of opportunities exist. We should encourage people to get out, enjoy and appreciate the beauty of the scenery that we have to offer.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister is aware that I have raised the issue of the benefits of mountain biking for tourism in Northern Ireland. I know that her Department is in discussions with Cookstown District Council about Davagh Forest; however, will the Minister detail what other ongoing discussions her Department has held to promote mountain biking in Northern Ireland and its tourism potential?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As the Member knows, our forests have great potential to support the tourism agenda. My officials have been exploring that area of opportunity. We have held discussions with councils and the Forest Service, which has been a major partner in developing mountain-bike trails in Cam Forest. Those discussions were especially relevant to the forests within the signature project areas that the Tourist Board has identified.

Forest Service officials have been involved in discussions with the Tourist Board and other stakeholders about the contribution that forests can make and how that can best be delivered. We are forming

partnerships with other interested providers, such as councils, to better realise the opportunities available. I will ensure that that work continues, and I am happy to keep the Member informed as things develop.

I hope that some exciting projects can be found for mountain biking in forests.

Mr McClarty: The Minister will be well aware of the huge difficulties in obtaining planning permission for rural tourism developments. Will the Minister detail what actions she has taken, with the Minister of the Environment, to address that?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Member is correct; as a constituency MP, I am aware of the difficulties in obtaining planning permission in time to spend the funding that has been allocated within the parameters. That has come up in discussions between the Minister of the Environment and me. I shall continue to press on the need to front-load applications that come from Government funding to ensure that money at the end of a project is not wasted because of a difficulty such as planning permission.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she outline how tourism is encouraged at Carlingford Lough and Lough Foyle? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Loughs Agency has a statutory responsibility for the development of marine tourism and the promotion of the development of Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough for commercial and recreational purposes. I understand that the agency is about to receive a letter of offer for €4 million of INTERREG funding under its tourism measure. The industry will promote a number of key themes, including boating access and infrastructure, angling infrastructure, visitor facilities such as drying rooms, and effective marketing.

The Loughs Agency has also implemented the sustainable development fund to assist tourism development in 2008-09. It had a budget of £100,000 in each year and provided funding to two broad themes: the development of angling and of marine tourism. Many good things are happening at Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough, and I hope that that is an added benefit to rural tourism projects.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 8 has been withdrawn, and Mr McElduff is not in his place to ask question 9.

Food Supply

10. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what her Department has done to improve the supply chain in the production of food.
(AQO 2740/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There is no doubt about the need to support our agrifood industry to improve and develop the supply chain, and the need for increased producer knowledge and involvement in the food supply chain was highlighted in the industry's vision report of 2001. In response to that, my Department initiated the supply-chain awareness programme for farmers to improve knowledge of their respective supply chains. That included learning workshops and a series of visits to examine supply chains here and in other countries. Between 2003 and 2007, over 1,300 producers participated in that programme.

A further programme was put together to support farmers who wished to take the next step and become more active in building a new supply chain. Under the Fit for Market initiative, we piloted the supply-chain development programme with six groups of farmers. That demonstrated the benefits of the programme, and it has now been adopted into axis 1 of the rural development programme to be available to more farmers. In turn, that interfaces with the processing and marketing grant scheme, and the marketing and development grant scheme, to support market-led initiatives through financial support, capital costs and non-capital expenditure.

My Department is also working with farmers and processors to increase their capability to improve and strengthen their supply chains. We are supporting a three-year project with the University of Ulster to analyse the vast amount of market data that is available from the Tesco Clubcard database. My answer is quite long, so I will take a supplementary question.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for that answer. Does her Department prevent duplicating the support that is available to the industry through Invest NI? If so, how does it do that?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: All the support for the improvement of supply chains has been carried out with the co-operation and involvement of Invest NI, and much of it was co-ordinated through interdepartmental working groups that were set up to implement the recommendations of the Fit for Market study. That is monitored by the Food Strategy Implementation Partnership. After the completion of that partnership's work, new arrangements have been put in place between DARD and DETI to co-ordinate support to the agrifood industry.

An industry advisory panel, an interdepartmental working group and five interdepartmental project teams, including a supply-chain team, have been set up to facilitate formal arrangements by which DARD and Invest NI work together for the good of the local agrifood industry.

Those teams will continue to develop and deliver work that is instigated under the Fit for Market initiative.

3.30 pm

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

North/South Bodies

1. **Dr W McCrea** asked Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assessment he has made of the effect of the Budget announced by the Government of the Republic of Ireland on the language and waterways North/South bodies. (AQO 2751/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): The implications of the supplementary Budget that was published in the Irish Republic in April 2009 on the North/South Language Body and Waterways Ireland are currently being considered by the Department of Finance and Personnel and by officials in my Department. The figures that have been published in the Irish Republic show that there has been a 10% reduction in funding for the North/South Language Body, which amounts to €1.84 million, and a 4% reduction in funding for Waterways Ireland, which amounts to €1.64 million, when compared against the 2008 out-turn figures.

As almost 94% of the North/South Language Body's funding in the Republic is directed towards Foras na Gaeilge, it appears to be suffering the major impact. However, budgets have not been agreed and, from my perspective, the priorities will be to deliver efficiencies from North/South bodies and to further reduce the funding disparity between Irish and Ulster Scots. Additionally, if current funding ratios are to be maintained, Northern Ireland's financial contribution to North/South bodies may need to be adjusted accordingly.

Dr W McCrea: Before I ask my supplementary question, I am sure that the Minister will join me in offering the family of Mark Young from Cookstown, who died after an incident at the North West 200, our deepest sympathy, while also praying earnestly that John Anderton from Antrim will make a speedy recovery and that his family will have comfort as they sit at his bedside during this difficult time.

What funding implications will the proposed cuts have for the two agencies of the North/South Language Body?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Of course, our thoughts and prayers are with the families who were affected by the incidents that took place at the North West 200. We hope that the injured biker will recover. We think of the relatives of the young biker who, sadly, on the first occasion of his taking part in the North West 200 lost his life.

Any revised amounts that are allocated to the two agencies must be agreed by the sponsor and the Finance Departments in Northern Ireland and the Republic. They must then be approved by Ministers at the North/South Ministerial Council's language sectoral meeting. Initial indications from the proposals that are currently under consideration are that the reduction in the Ulster-Scots Agency's budget will be in the region of 3% of its proposed budget figure. That equates to approximately £100,000. Initial indications for Foras na Gaeilge's budget, which is funded predominantly by my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, are that it could face a reduction in funding of between 8% and 9%. That equates to a reduction of in the region of €1.89 million against the draft budget.

Since I came to office, one of my objectives has been to eliminate the disparity in funding for Irish and Ulster Scots, just as it was for my predecessor. It is unfortunate that this is the route that may have to be pursued, but, nonetheless, the Republic has had to cut its cloth accordingly. That is a matter for its Government, who have made that decision. Northern Ireland must make a corresponding reduction. Therefore, the gap will narrow, although not in the way that we had anticipated.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I want to be associated with William McCrea's comments and extend my sympathy to the family of Mark Young.

Will the Minister provide assurance that any efficiency savings that are made will not impact on the operational effectiveness of Waterways Ireland or, indeed, the all-Ireland language body, An Foras Teanga, given the importance of their work?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I can certainly assure the Member that my objective is to ensure that taxpayers in Northern Ireland, in particular, get value for money. We want to ensure that the incorporated savings do not impact on the front line service that the various bodies provide. However, we are in a different financial regime from the one that we were in 12 months ago, or two or three years ago, and we may have to curtail expenditure. We will do so in the appropriate way and minimise direct services to consumers.

As usual, the Member used language such as "all-Ireland bodies". I am not sure what that means. If he means bodies that are made up from bodies from this country and from the Irish Republic, I know exactly what he means, even if he has misappropriated the language. However, we intend to ensure that people receive value for money.

Mr Gardiner: Has the Minister assessed the financial cuts that are likely to be imposed on his Department after the Chancellor's announcement of £14 billion of efficiency savings for the period after 2011? Has he discussed that issue with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the rest of the Executive?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Discussions are ongoing on the implications of that announcement for a range of Departments, not only for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. We will discuss the issue with the Department of Finance and Personnel and have wider discussions with the Chancellor to minimise implications for people in Northern Ireland and to maintain the position in so far as it is possible.

Mr Attwood: The Minister's remarks are somewhat churlish. The Government in the other part of Ireland have given millions of pounds to the North and provided up to 85% of the funding for Waterways Ireland. I was waiting for the Minister to do a jig of delight at how the Southern economy is suffering and how the North will bear the financial consequences. Will he reassure the House that, in his conversations with the Irish Government, he will be mindful of their economic conditions and will leave no stone unturned to maximise the Irish Government's funding of Foras na Gaeilge, the Ulster-Scots Language Agency and Waterways Ireland? Will he punch his weight during those negotiations?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The honourable Member is attempting to overreach himself. I must ensure that the delivery of the Department's functions, through arm's-length bodies and so on, ensures that value for money is accrued. I intend to secure value for money for the Ulster-Scots Language Agency and through our contribution to Foras na Gaeilge.

The honourable Member says that I am being churlish. I am not being churlish at all; I am merely reporting the factual position given to me by my counterpart in the Irish Republic. The Irish Government report that they have had to cut their cloth accordingly and reduce significantly the amount of money that they put into the North/South Language Body. We will have to do likewise. It is a case not of churlishness but of facing reality. We will do what we can to protect services and, as far as possible, to deliver the programmes that we have outlined. However, we must face that reality and not run away from it.

Sports Grounds: Safety

2. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his Department's proposals for

ensuring that spectator safety at sports grounds is not compromised. (AQO 2752/09)

6. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action his Department is taking to increase safety at sports stadiums. (AQO 2756/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 6 together.

In the first instance, responsibility for increasing safety at sports grounds and ensuring that it is not compromised rests with the owners and operators of those venues. However, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is currently taking forward a safety at sports grounds initiative. The aim of that is to encourage and assist owners and operators of major sports facilities to improve spectator safety at their grounds. As part of that initiative, the Department has introduced and is currently implementing new legislation on safety at sports grounds; that is, the Safety of Sports Grounds (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

Furthermore, Sport Northern Ireland, which is responsible for the development of sport, including the distribution of funding, has been running funding programmes designed to assist owners and operators of venues to improve spectator safety at their venues. Those include a stadia safety programme and, previously, an interim safe sports ground scheme.

In addition, I am in ongoing correspondence with Paul Goggins MP, Minister with responsibility for criminal justice in the NIO, about the introduction of complementary public order legislation to help combat spectator behaviour problems where they arise. DCAL officials have assisted the NIO with the development of draft proposals for legislation, and I have since written to Minister Goggins asking him to publish those for consultation as soon as is practicable. I understand from the NIO that a response will be provided shortly.

Mr Burns: Can the Minister tell us how much money is available to upgrade facilities at sports grounds? Does he not agree that the GAA county grounds, the Irish league football grounds and rugby grounds such as Ravenhill need a massive injection of cash immediately to get them up to the necessary standard?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I can tell the Member that, in the past eight and a half years, Sport Northern Ireland has made available approximately £12.5 million since August 2000 to help clubs develop proposals and implement safety improvements at their grounds. There are a number of schemes in place, and I know of a range of applications that are currently being processed that will complement that total. It is work in progress that needs to continue, and I certainly intend to ensure that, in so far as we can, we will

develop grounds in which spectators can watch sport in safety and those participating can do so in safety.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister have any concept of the shortfall between the funding that is available and the amount of money that is needed to bring the grounds up to the required safety levels? Furthermore, can he give us a time frame or any indication of when we are likely to see some progress on the issue of the Football (Offences) Act 1991?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I do not have figures for the shortfall between what is available and what is required, because a number of stadia can be assisted by offering provision merely to eliminate relatively minor safety problems, whereas other grounds may have more major problems. The obvious example is Windsor Park, where there are safety considerations involving some aspects of the ground that are more significant than others. Work on what needs to be done is ongoing. I cannot provide the Member with a time frame, but I will obtain that and write to her, so that she can get a clear picture of when that is likely to be achieved.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister indicate what proportion of his Department's overall safety-linked expenditure on football goes towards major league clubs and what proportion goes to local and community-based football teams? While I am on my feet, will he join me in congratulating Glentoran Football Club on lifting the Gibson Cup? I am sure that he trusts that Glasgow Rangers can emulate that achievement.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In relation to the latter part of the Member's question, I know that he is a long-standing Glentoran supporter, but he will understand that, as sports Minister, I must remain neutral.

Moving swiftly on, he has asked me to outline the breakdown of expenditure on major league grounds and how that compares with the smaller teams. I know that Sport Northern Ireland recently provided funding to Ballymena United, Cliftonville, Portadown and Donegal Celtic and to Gaelic football grounds in Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Tyrone and Antrim. The smaller grounds do not require such significant investments in safety, but Sport NI will be able to provide the Member with a comprehensive list that he can peruse at his leisure.

3.45 pm

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response about safety at sports grounds. Many of us have concerns about that issue, but does the Minister know whether there have been any major incidents or injuries at football grounds in the past few years?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his question, which is pertinent in the context of some headlines that followed previous questions for oral answer. Unfortunately, discussions about spectator safety can cover anything from a faulty turnstile or light bulb to major problems with stands in which a significant number of people may be at risk. Some people in the media concentrate only on the major issues, for understandable reasons. I am not aware of any safety considerations at football grounds that have led to major accidents in recent years. However, that is not a cause for over-optimism in future. There are grounds in need of upgrading that have received money and will continue to receive money. We must ensure that maximum spectator safety is delivered and that participants play at grounds that have safety provisions built in.

Library Services

3. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how his Department intends to ensure that there are high-quality long-term working relationships with the Department of Education with regard to the provision of library services. (AQO 2753/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department has had a close working relationship with the Department of Education throughout the process of creating the new Northern Ireland library authority, which will now be known as Libraries NI. Those arrangements will continue into the future with the education and library boards and then the education and skills authority. Libraries NI is developing strategic partnerships with a number of organisations, and close working arrangements will continue for the delivery of the public and schools library service.

My officials are also working closely with the Education and Training Inspectorate on a learning strategy with the aim of developing innovative ways of supporting schools' delivery of the revised curriculum. Public libraries will continue to work with schools and school-age children through classroom visits, homework clubs and reading groups, to list just a few of the many services that are provided by public libraries.

Mr Dallat: I strongly welcome the Minister's reply. Does he agree with me that, considering the very high levels of illiteracy and innumeracy in Northern Ireland and particularly the 250,000 people between the ages of 16 and 64 who have been failed by the education system, there must be the closest co-operation between the library service and the Department of Education? Furthermore, will he ensure that that service is available in all the towns and villages of Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The short answer is yes. Unfortunately, the library service is somewhat of a Cinderella service, and it is much overlooked. I highly recommend that honourable Members and the wider public visit their local library, because the traditional concept of a library has changed dramatically in the past five or six years. I know that change is on the agenda for the next few years as well. I concur fully with the honourable Member's remarks. There must be close co-operation between the new libraries authority and the schools. In addition, the "silver surfer" phenomenon has become a significant feature in libraries. Senior citizens are using libraries to obtain information and to pass their leisure time. Libraries have undergone significant developments for the benefit of all age groups, and I recommend that people use them. It is to be hoped that the progress that has been made will continue in the future.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister provide details of the smooth operation or otherwise of the voluntary redundancy scheme that was part of the formation of the library authority?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My understanding is that progress is being made on the transfer and on those who are facing redundancy. Obviously, salary payments must be adapted for those who are moving from their previous employer to continue working for the new employer. I understand that there are no significant outstanding difficulties and that the transition is reasonably smooth.

Mr T Clarke: What meetings has the Minister had with the Department of Education on the setting up of Libraries NI?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In the financial year that has just ended, Libraries NI met the permanent secretary of DCAL and Department of Education officials to address all outstanding issues. Subsequent to that series of initial meetings, a further series of meetings took place between my Department and the Department of Education on a range of transfer matters. Of course, in the coming months, such meetings will continue until the process has been completed.

Football Grounds

4. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what his Department and its associated bodies have done to support stadia improvements for football clubs in the past financial year and if there are plans to support improvements in this financial year. (AQO 2754/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The responsibility for stadia improvements at football clubs rests, in the first instance, with the owners of the

venues. However, Sport NI, which is responsible for the development of sport, including the distribution of funding, has been running a number of programmes to which owners of football stadia are eligible to apply. Those include the stadia safety programme and the soccer strategy playing facilities programme.

In the past financial year, Sport NI has paid out more than £1.3 million from those programmes to, among others, Ballymena United Football Club, Cliftonville Football Club, Donegal Celtic Football Club and Portadown Football Club to assist with improvements to their stadia. For the current CSR period, DCAL has allocated £8.418 million for stadia safety. In this financial year, Sport NI is considering awarding £5.45 million, of which £3.85 million will be aimed at football stadia. Of course, that is subject to economic appraisals, statutory processes and the necessary approvals.

Furthermore, the Irish Football Association has launched a soccer strategy playing facilities programme to assist Irish league clubs to meet UEFA licensing and IFA Premiership and IFA Intermediate League facility requirements. Under that programme, Sport NI has issued provisional letters of offer totalling £3.47 million to 23 football clubs.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive response. When might the money that could be released this year be available to football clubs?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am glad that the Member asked about the precise timing, because DCAL and Sport NI are considering five business cases that football clubs have submitted under the stadia safety programme. Subject to the completion of the necessary accountability and approval processes, I expect approval to be given to a number of those clubs in time for the beginning of the new football season. Institute Football Club and Ballymena United Football Club are two of the clubs that are at the forefront of the approval process.

Lord Browne: Will the Minister confirm that the necessary health and safety measures will be implemented at Windsor Park to ensure that international football is played there for the foreseeable future? I also take this opportunity to congratulate the other two Belfast clubs that lifted trophies recently; namely, Crusaders Football Club and Harland and Wolff Welders Football Club.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I sense that there will be a round of congratulations to all clubs as we come towards the end of the football season. There are a few other trophies yet to be won, not just in Northern Ireland. We shall see what the next week or so brings forth.

The Member rightly raises the issue of Windsor Park. It is imperative that we maintain and retain

international football in Northern Ireland for the Northern Ireland team. Someone told me that, since I came to office, Northern Ireland has been unbeaten in competitive games. That is good. I wish we could finish the rest of the qualifying campaign in the next couple of months, because then we could get through to the World Cup finals without any difficulty.

We need to ensure that Windsor Park is kept up to the necessary standard and that international football continues to be played there, so that we do not find ourselves in the position that we were in a few years ago, whereby Northern Ireland had to play its home games in either England or Scotland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn, and question 6 has been grouped.

Sports Funding

7. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans his Department has to lobby the NIO to ensure that monies acquired from criminal assets recovery will be reinvested in sport.
(AQO 2757/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Issues pertinent to assets recovery and the redistribution of cash forfeiture receipts are a reserved matter and the responsibility of the Home Office in conjunction with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I am aware, however, that recovered assets from both civil and criminal cases are returned to the Home Office, which retains half and returns the remaining half of the amount raised, net of costs, to the agency or agencies responsible for the recovery. That is known as incentivisation. Where a portion of the incentivisation funds are directed towards the community, it is clear that those funds are to be used to fund local crime-fighting priorities for the benefit of that community.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. In thanking the Minister for his answer, I wonder if he has had any contact with his counterpart in Scotland, the Minister for Public Health and Sport, who has an excellent scheme that uses all assets recovered from criminals to pour back into health projects. Does the Minister have any such plans for the future?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am aware of the Scottish scheme, and I will want to ensure that whatever is available elsewhere is no more generous than would be available in Northern Ireland. I have not had any discussions with the Minister for Public Health and Sport as this is a relatively new funding scheme, and I am told by the NIO that it is at a very early stage. I am happy to have such discussions.

All of us, whether Members, Ministers or members of the public, should do whatever we can to ensure that those who are engaged in crime cease to engage in it. We must do whatever we can to ensure that young people do not get involved in crime in the first place. If we can channel funds into providing opportunities, particularly sporting opportunities, to ensure that young people do not get involved in criminal activities, we should do so.

Mr McNarry: I note that the Member for Foyle who asked the previous question, who might know someone who might know some more, is not offering cash back from the proceeds of the Northern Bank robbery. It would substantially add to the criminal asset recovery funds if he or some of his friends were to come forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member keep to his question?

Mr McNarry: I am sorry if that upset you, Deputy Speaker. I will follow your instructions.

The Minister alluded to the CashBack for Communities programme in Scotland, which has benefited 38,000 young people and invested £11 million. Those behind the scheme negotiated for that money. Does the Minister agree that it would be worthwhile to attempt to negotiate a sum from the Northern Ireland Office for a similar scheme in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member and empathise with his views on all that we have to do and should keep doing to ensure that benefit is accrued, particularly but not exclusively for young people. We should do all we can to ensure that they do not get involved with paramilitary groups; and there are those who have some prior knowledge of that type of activity in a past life. Now that we have moved away from that and people have decided that that is not the route for them, we ought to ensure that no future generation does likewise.

As I said in my previous answer, I want to ensure that the Northern Ireland scheme is no less generous than the scheme in Scotland or any other similar scheme. At present, it is a reserved matter, but I am happy to have the discussions that will be required to ensure that, in helping people to stay away from crime, we get the best possible bang for our buck.

4.00 pm

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In relation to Mr McNarry's lead-in to his question, were his comments about another Member appropriate? I ask the Speaker to check the record and return with a ruling. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Speaker will look at the Hansard report and will reply.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Restructuring of the Executive and Assembly

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly supports, in principle, the restructuring of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Assembly in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to update the Assembly on the proposals for the creation of an Efficiency Review Panel, as announced on 9 April 2009, and to agree to implement a review and produce a report on the issue of the number of MLAs and government Departments in the next Assembly, within the next six months. — *[Mr McNarry.]*

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "supports" and insert

"improving the efficiency and effectiveness of government; recognises the need for new scrutiny and oversight arrangements in the Assembly to permanently pursue such ends; calls on the First and deputy First Minister to make a statement on their proposals for an Efficiency Review Panel; notes the review procedures set out in the Belfast Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to provide for agreed changes to the institutions, including the size and structure of the Assembly and the institutional workings of the Executive; further notes the role of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee in examining such matters; calls on that Committee to accelerate consideration of changes to the number of MLAs and the number of government Departments; and asks it to produce a report this year outlining proposals which respect the principles of proportional representation and inclusion." — *[Mr Durkan.]*

Mr Ross: One would be forgiven for thinking that there is a touch of déjà vu in Mr McNarry's motion, given that it was Members of the DUP who brought the issue to the House on 19 January 2009. However, Mr McNarry has been accused of recycling DUP speeches for his own use before, so it should be considered nothing new if he does the same with motions.

Mr McNarry's justification for tabling his motion was that the motion tabled by the DUP in January was a stunt. However, that does not hold much water, given that he has tabled exactly the same motion. Looking back at the debate on that motion on 19 January, it is interesting to note the comments of some Members from the Ulster Unionist Party, who spoke with scepticism and questioned the relevance of the motion. I am glad that those Members have changed their minds and are now, just a few months later, in full support of DUP policy.

Mr McNarry knows why we have an inflated Assembly. It is because of the role that his party played in creating a swollen number of Departments and in ensuring that there are 108 Assembly Members. That was not done for efficiency but so that the minor parties could be represented in the Chamber and Sinn Féin could be represented at the Executive table. Before devolution in 1998, the NIO was able to operate with only six Departments. Perhaps we should look at

that model of government and use it as a starting point when we consider the shape that reform should take in Northern Ireland.

From the outset, the Democratic Unionist Party opposed the structures that were set up as part of the Belfast Agreement, and it has maintained that position since it became the largest party in the Assembly. Just last week, we launched 'Driving forward a reform agenda', a document which outlines many of the structural changes that are required at Stormont, including a reduction in the number of Assembly Members to, perhaps, 54 or 72 and a reduction in the number of Departments to six or seven. However, perhaps we should take the process of slimming down the Executive in stages; we could start with eight Departments and work backwards. In addition, we have said that there should be an end to mandatory coalition, a streamlining of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, an end to the designation process and an end to the financial waste that is associated with certain North/South bodies, various quangos and the Civic Forum. When it comes to reform, it is the DUP that comes up with the ideas and policies.

I listened to Mr O'Dowd's comments earlier in the debate. Any reform agendas proposed by the DUP do not seek a return to single-party rule; there must be built-in protections for all minority communities and, if we are changing the designation system, there could be weighted-majority voting in the Chamber. It is important that we move to more democratic structures. With regard to the Equality Commission and other such quangos, we seek not to abolish all of their agendas but to bring them together for efficiency purposes.

At a time when we are moving forward with the RPA and reducing the number of councils across Northern Ireland, it is a good time to start looking at what we can do here. The reasons for such reform are twofold. First, the money that is saved can be redirected towards front line services. Secondly, we can come up with more streamlined, effective and efficient structures so that, for example, voluntary groups that are struggling to find funding do not have to go to three or four Departments and get shunted from one place to another.

Reform is also needed so that we have more consistent and structured planning within certain Departments, particularly the Department of Education. All Members will have dealt with voluntary and community groups that have had difficulties in finding the right Department to get funding from.

Education is a prime example. The Department of Education is responsible for a young person until he or she leaves school, but once they leave school they are the responsibility of the Department for Employment

and Learning. We should consider a single Department for lifelong learning similar to that in Scotland; most people would recognise that as a sensible way forward.

We can see examples of how other devolved institutions in the United Kingdom, in Cardiff or in Edinburgh, have slimmed down their Executives and how they organise their Departments. We heard earlier that the Welsh Assembly has 60 Members and the Scottish Parliament 129. Compared to the populations of those regions and the number of their elected representatives, Northern Ireland is massively over-represented. We need change.

We must welcome the intention to establish the efficiency review panel and the ongoing review of North/South bodies. At this time of tighter finances, it is important that the House send out the message that it supports reform and greater efficiency. This issue also presents a challenge for nationalist Members to examine genuinely some of the North/South structures and ask whether they provide value for money, particularly in the light of recent comments by the Irish Government about slimming them down.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Ross: I support the motion but reject the amendment.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like my colleague John O'Dowd, I cast some scorn on the motion and the amendment; today's debate is a wee bit of a sham fight.

The Good Friday Agreement and the underpinning structures of these institutions contain the facility for the formal reviews about which Members have been speaking. The Assembly and Executive Review Committee includes the deputy leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, one of whose members tabled the motion, and SDLP representation. Therefore, the parties that tabled the motion and the amendment are represented on the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and are fully aware that that Committee, in its workload and forward planning, has already agreed to fulfil its remit by undertaking to review the institutions to which the motion and amendment refer. Moreover, OFMDFM recently announced the establishment of an efficiency review panel. Therefore, the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP are fully aware that there already exists the wherewithal to carry out such a review. The matter was, as Members have said, well debated in the House not too long ago; therefore, Sinn Féin cannot see why the motion and its proposed amendment have been tabled today.

I want to reiterate some of John O'Dowd's comments. All parties had the opportunity in the review of public administration and the reform of local government to cut back on bureaucracy in the interests

of efficiency and effectiveness — underpinned by equality and community balance — but they failed to do so. There remains in the RPA the clear need and ability to review and downsize the number of quangos. In every debate on this matter in recent years, Members regularly referred to the number of quangos or unaccountable bodies as some might call them. Yet we have never managed the type of cull that is required for a number of those agencies and groups. That is work that we need to undertake, and it is within the remit of the review of public administration. It is being spearheaded under the tutelage of the Minister of the Environment, Sammy Wilson, but all parties are involved through the strategic leadership board. Therefore, all parties have had the opportunity and will continue to have the opportunity to ensure that they maximise and put into practice all the demands and assertions that they are making here again today. I have heard plenty of demands but no commitments.

The leader of the SDLP, Mark Durkan, whose party tabled an amendment to the motion, said that his party had raised the idea of taking away one of the existing Departments, instead of creating an additional Department to facilitate the transfer of justice powers. However, that proposal was never made in my time. No Member or party put that proposal to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee before it produced its latest report, which was endorsed by the Assembly.

Some Members said that they want to make proposals, and they outlined a number of them, such as approaching the Boundary Commission to seek a reduction in the number of elected representatives. However, those proposals have not been formally made by any party. We talk about reducing the number of MLAs, cutting back on the number of Departments, quangos and so on, but not one proposal has been put before the Committee to back any of that up.

John O'Dowd made the point that we are in the mouth of an election. Parties want to hear themselves talking and to be seen to place issues on the agenda as though they are trying to do something about them. However, when they have had the opportunity to do something about such issues, they have failed miserably.

We are not wedded to any number of Departments, and we are strongly committed to ensuring that the institutions are efficient and effective. However, those institutions were built on the basis of ensuring that we have a participative democracy and that we have inclusion. That is why we have the number of MLAs per constituency that has served us well so far. Nevertheless, we are fully prepared to see through the review in a non-prescriptive manner.

Mr Poots: We are living in an era when the public are demanding change, and the House needs to take on board what the public are saying. Everything that has

happened in the past few weeks has brought the public's focus and attention to issues around politics and how it works. We have stated for some time how this place could work better and how we could do a better service for the public at a lower cost. Ultimately, it would be a notable achievement if we could arrive at the point at which we are delivering a better service to the public at a lower cost. Many of the proposals that have been set out indicate how that can be done.

At St Andrews, many of the unsavoury aspects of the Belfast Agreement were amended until we reached a situation in which we had a means of taking matters forward, but the task is not complete; there is still work to be done. I do not think that a mandatory coalition is the way forward. Although that arrangement may serve us temporarily, ultimately we need to work towards bringing the process to a conclusion, to the point at which we have normality and a voluntary coalition that can represent a broad scope of the community in Northern Ireland without being exclusive.

There is also work to be done to make government more efficient. I recall wondering why there was a need for 108 MLAs when I first read the Belfast Agreement. However, it was obvious that the system was designed to get as many people as possible from as many backgrounds as possible into the Assembly. There were parties such as the Women's Coalition, the UDP and the PUP, but the only party that remains in the Assembly is the Progressive Unionist Party. The other parties have been dealt with by the electors, who have said that they do not want those parties to represent them. Therefore, there is no point in having additional seats to bring those people into this forum — they cannot get elected even with those extra seats.

The Civic Forum was a laughing stock, and I have heard people from various parties attempt to defend it for some time. The Civic Forum had no credibility, and it will have no credibility in the future if we are foolish enough to re-establish it. However, I do not believe that that will happen. Many of the North/South bodies have demonstrated themselves to be fairly ineffective, and I do not believe that we can continue putting in the sort of money that is going to those bodies unless they are more effective and can deliver for people. We cannot have them just for the sake of having them. That would be a political decision, and that is not acceptable.

Then, of course, there were the 10 Departments. Many of us were aghast when we moved from six to 10 Departments. Was that done for the public's benefit, or was it a political carve-up by the two main parties of the time, the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP? Of course it was political carve-up.

4.15 pm

Ten years later, I am glad that the Ulster Unionists have woken up, smelt the coffee and realised, "Oh,

we've got this wrong; in fact, we've got it badly wrong." Ulster Unionist Members are now jumping on to the DUP bandwagon, on which they are very welcome, by acknowledging that we must have more efficient government.

I know that David McNarry was around at that time, for I often saw him and David Trimble together. When the designers tell the Assembly that what they designed is wrong, is bad and is no longer fit for purpose — I see that designer David is shaking his head — it is reasonable to conclude that the DUP got it right at the time. With the Ulster Unionists on board, we need others to join us, including the SDLP, by admitting that they also got it wrong and by starting to deliver more efficient government for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Ross: Does the Member recognise that it is not only Ulster Unionist MLAs who now support DUP policy? Some of the party's members in North Down are leaving the Ulster Unionist Party to join the DUP.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will be allowed an extra minute.

Mr Kennedy: What about Jim Allister?

Mr Poots: Thank you very much. Those Ulster Unionists will always be very welcome. Mr Kennedy asks, "What about Jim Allister?". I suggest that he will be making that comment again in a few weeks' time. However, we will wait and see. The electorate will have the opportunity to consider that issue.

We cannot continue to argue for 108 Members. I look to Sinn Féin, which appears quite defensive about changing anything here in case it undermines some of its political agenda. However, we cannot tell the public that 108 MLAs are required. That argument cannot be made to the public. I declare here today that I am prepared to go into an election in which there are fewer seats for MLAs in my constituency, and if I lose my seat, so be it. For the sake of the general public, we must plan to reduce the number of MLAs.

We must also challenge the Civil Service, which is grossly overmanned. In particular, we must reduce its middle management. How can we challenge the Civil Service when the Assembly is overmanned in the first place? For MLAs to vote to reduce their numbers is like turkeys voting for Christmas. Nonetheless, that is what must be done in the wider public interest.

Mr Elliott: It is interesting that this debate follows the discussion on health, in which I was pleased that the Minister gave another assurance of his commitment to free personal care for the elderly. That has been an Ulster Unionist Party commitment for some time and one on which it has delivered. More delivery is required of this Government. Let it be clear: we will not get delivery by sitting on our hands. We can all

shout back and forward in the Chamber, but what we really want is practical, working politics.

When we consider the motion that my colleague Mr McNarry tabled, we must look back at the St Andrews Agreement. We hear all the talk about the Belfast Agreement, but look back to the more recent St Andrews Agreement. The opportunity to make various changes at that time was not taken. Yes, we were promised a review panel. A press release from OFMDFM in April stated that proposals on the appointment of that panel would be brought to this place after Easter. I suppose that OFMDFM remains within that timescale, because it is still after Easter. However, we are almost in the summer, so it may come about after the summer. We must have more than a statement that outlines a vague timescale. We must have real proposals. We must see the panel appointed, up and running and delivering.

We must have efficiencies. Members badger our Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the Chamber about efficiencies that, given more money, he would not be required to find. The only way to get to that position is by starting to make changes in this place. I hear Members who have been here for years saying that that is their policy, but they have not done much about it up until now. Therefore, it is time that we all got real and started making the necessary changes.

We are also aware that, while other Departments and their budgets are being squeezed, the number of staff in OFMDFM has increased hugely since the two larger parties took over two years ago.

It is unfortunate that the SDLP tabled its amendment. The Ulster Unionist Party will not support it. I ask the SDLP to reconsider and to support our motion, which I believe is real and practical. We all want the efficiency review panel to report within six months. Is there anybody here who does not want that? I hope and trust that the SDLP will help us.

We also need real, practical government. I am sometimes fed up with the "we cannot do it because" attitude, which means that somebody has blown the dust off a four-year-old consultation report and highlighted a paragraph to a Minister that states that the matter in question cannot be addressed. We must have a system that is about real politics and about people here making decisions that help and support people. That is what was expected of us when we were elected, and it is what we have to deliver.

Sometimes, it is very unfortunate that, because we or, indeed, the Senior Civil Service cannot make decisions, we pay a fortune to have a consultation report done. If we are to stand for election, we have to be big enough to make the necessary decisions and get

on with life. The business world is screaming for us to get on, do the work and make those decisions.

I have not always been critical of the Civil Service, but I have had my day. The practical reality is that decisions have to be made. Some career civil servants and people who work in government have never lived in the real world. A person should not reach the Senior Civil Service unless they have served in the private sector for four years. That would ensure that they know what the real world is about.

I ask Members to get behind our motion and to let us move on with good government.

Mr O'Loan: The first question is: why did the Ulster Unionist Party table the motion today? Surely the answer is to do with recent DUP comments about and proposals on this issue; the Ulster Unionists feel that getting a slice of that action would be beneficial to them.

When we are considering an issue such as this, it is important that it is approached seriously. The motion does not do that. It is simplistic and incomplete. It does not do justice to the seriousness of the issue. That is the reason why we produced a substantial amendment and the reason why we cannot support the motion.

In many ways, the motion is a surrogate for recent DUP views. My criticisms of the motion apply even more to the plethora of recent DUP comments about this issue. I will say something about the technical weakness of the DUP arguments in a moment, but I will first talk about the reason that the DUP has made such comments recently. Very often, the reason is more important than the detail and tells us a good deal more about the current state of politics and what could come out of that situation. There are real dangers in the way that the DUP is presenting the debate.

The first reason that the DUP is presenting its case is to try to divert the public from far more pressing issues, such as the fact that it is failing to deliver on the vital issue of economic change. It has been mentioned that an election is coming up in a couple of weeks. It is hardly a coincidence that so much of this talk is recent. The DUP wants to pretend that the focus on apparent efficiency makes a major contribution to improving our economic state or that it is at least a signal of what the party would describe as moving in the right direction. That is a false lesson, and I hope that the public will not be fooled by it.

My second criticism is that underlying the philosophy of cutting the number of MLAs and Departments is a belief that somehow Northern Ireland can be made into a normal place. My response to that is that Northern Ireland is not and cannot ever be a normal place. Mechanisms have been created with great difficulty and considerable pain over many years.

Mr Ross: On the Member's first point that it is a recent conversion that has led the DUP to push the subject for electoral purposes, does he not concede that it has in fact been Democratic Unionist Party policy for the past 10 years? When the Belfast Agreement established the Assembly, we said that the institution was inflated and needed to be reduced in size, and that message has been consistent.

On the Member's second point about the number of MLAs, does he not recognise that Northern Ireland is far over-represented compared with anywhere else in the world? That needs to change if we are really to take the Assembly seriously.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member may have an extra minute.

Mr O'Loan: If the DUP were serious about making changes, it has had two years in which to deliver them. The party has had it fully within its legal powers to bring measures to the Assembly before now, yet it has not done so.

We have created mechanisms to deal with a very complex society; one that contains very real and deep tensions. Nobody should believe for a moment that those tensions can be eradicated by tinkering with the structures. Let me voice an alternative approach, which is to stop worrying so much about tinkering with the structures and to focus more on making those structures work. If Members read our amendment, they will see precise methods that would make those structures work even better. Such an approach would make a big difference to the way in which much of the business is conducted here.

I must comment on the technical weakness of the DUP case. Nigel Dodds states that cutting the number of MLAs and Departments will save £40 million to £50 million. I am amazed at the extent to which that figure has been bought without thought by so many Members. Cutting the number of MLAs to 72 would save the sum of £4 million a year or perhaps a little more if the offices at Stormont and so on were taken into account. Joining together Departments does not necessarily save money, unless things are done consequently. However, those things could be done anyway without the need to join together Departments. In our recent document, the SDLP advocated ways in which we might save considerable sums of public money. The argument for reducing the number of MLAs and Departments comes from a lead party in the Assembly that runs three economic policy units yet has not thought to eradicate that bit of complexity. That really shows where the DUP is coming from.

Some gains can be made from having a larger number of Departments. If they are run properly, greater opportunities arise for the public, key groups and individuals to interface with our Ministers, and

that is what the public are looking for from a working Assembly. That is something that we should value and make work. Of course, change will be needed in due course, but, in the meantime, do not simply create a smokescreen around the issue, which is what this debate largely does. When change is made, do not throw out the baby with the bathwater but ensure that our Government remain fully inclusive; otherwise, the Government still have the potential to collapse. If the DUP is serious about making government more efficient, set that in the much broader context of public sector reform. Restructuring the Executive and the Assembly is only one aspect of public sector reform, and, arguably, it is neither the most urgent nor has it the most potential for real gain.

Mr Attwood: The essential difference between what the SDLP amendment proposes and what the UUP motion proposes is political ownership of the agenda of efficiency and effectiveness to produce a proper political way forward. Our method is more rounded and more balanced and will produce a fairer outcome. The Ulster Unionist motion puts all the eggs in one basket, and that basket is the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Members should warn themselves against adopting that mechanism. There are two or three reasons for my saying that. One reason is that the temptation in OFMDFM, as Members have seen in too many instances over the past two years, has been to act in a partisan or partial way. The temptation to do so in respect of this issue will manifest itself in due course as well.

4.30 pm

If Members do not believe in that argument, they should accept that it is folly to believe the notion that OFMDFM will come forward with proposals within the next six months, as proposed in the motion. Members should consider the facts. In two years, OFMDFM has failed to present proposals on a range of high-profile and important issues around victims, sharing and cohesion. Furthermore, in the past two weeks, we have heard two Ministers — one from the DUP and one from the Ulster Unionist Party — say that, once again, things are getting held up in OFMDFM, and Executive business is not getting turned over. Even the UUP's Health Minister is saying that he cannot get OFMDFM and the Executive to sign off important proposals. Why, therefore, should we give OFMDFM more authority on an issue around which there could be all sorts of mischief-making?

DUP Members made some interesting observations, but I was astounded that Simon Hamilton and the other DUP Members who spoke missed the obvious irony of today's debate. It is four months to the day since the DUP motion on reducing the number of Departments was passed, but OFMDFM has been so inefficient that

it has not moved forward with the membership of the proposed efficiency review panel. The irony of that should not escape anyone.

I agree with my colleague Mr O'Loan. What worries me as much as anything about the DUP's ambitions is its attempt to reconfigure the equality, human rights and wider issues in Northern society. When it was fully developed, our conflict revolved around issues of law, order and justice. Unfortunately, a small number of people in state organisations and in terror groups took that difference to the point of murder and mayhem.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second. We have learned from our 30-year experience about how to create a balance of institutional safeguards and mechanisms to protect equality, human rights and policing and justice arrangements, and if the DUP proposes to unpick all that — under the guise of efficiency and effectiveness — it does so at some peril. Those institutions, which can work better, are a consequence of our conflict that revolved around those rubbing points, and the DUP needs to be cautious in looking at that.

I want to reserve my final comments for Sinn Féin.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: Apparently, I will not be given extra time if I give way during a winding-up speech.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You will, Mr Attwood.

Mr Attwood: I will give way to the Member.

Mr Poots: The Member said that the original agreement was based around law, order and justice. However, at that time, one could be in Government and not support law and order. In fact, punishment beatings were being perpetrated by the IRA while a Sinn Féin Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was in post. It was at the DUP's insistence that parties had to support law and order before they could enter Government. That is the difference between now and then.

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

Mr Attwood: I do not walk away from some of the consequences of what the Member has said. My point is that our national conflict revolved around issues of law, order and justice. At any one time during the conflict, the rubbing points were disputes, differences and divisions about how law, order and justice were — or were not — administered in the North. Look at parades, our courts and the kangaroo courts of the IRA and others. They were the rubbing points of our conflict, and the institutional arrangements of the Good

Friday Agreement were meant to resolve that and, for all their inefficiencies, they have contributed to that.

John O'Dowd said that Sinn Féin would oppose any measures to undermine the entitlements of the Good Friday Agreement. How hollow does that sound? Sinn Féin has conceded the entitlement of the Good Friday Agreement and d'Hondt in its proposal for a justice Minister, and it conceded the entitlements of ministerial authority through its sell-out to the DUP at St Andrews.

When people hear that sort of language, they know that Sinn Féin says one thing —

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

Mr Attwood: — but does something absolutely different.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to wind up the debate on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. It has been interesting to listen to the pre-election gambits of the various representatives. Nonetheless, the motion was brought forward as a serious proposal, and I welcome the fact that, at least, we have all had an opportunity to air our views on it.

I will deal first with Members' contributions. Obviously, Mr Durkan thinks that the SDLP amendment has more merit than the motion. From my party's point of view, the proper focus has to remain on the First Minister and deputy First Minister and their Department. Having made announcements, they should bring forward proposals as they have promised. The SDLP amendment seeks only to confuse people and to throw in, at this stage, additional issues that are not helpful.

Mr Hamilton from the Democratic Unionist Party said that it had always been the DUP's view that it was a lone voice in calling for the number of MLAs and Departments to be reduced. It seemed strange that although he mentioned the various reforms through which the DUP had effected savings and caused public expenditure to be reduced, the one issue that he did not mention was the appointment of four victims' commissioners. That seemed to increase public expenditure, rather than reduce it. However, I am sure that he will address that oversight at some stage.

Mr O'Dowd was unconvinced by the arguments and took a cynical view on why we were talking about the issue today. He promised us that no changes would be made to the Good Friday Agreement as Sinn Féin saw it, and we have heard the SDLP view on that.

I am grateful to Naomi Long for indicating that the Alliance Party supports the motion. She said, rightly, that the original conditions were designed to meet the political needs of the time. However, nothing lasts forever, and the law of the Medes and Persians does not apply here. Changes can come.

I am glad to see that Mr Ross is in his place. Until he spoke, he seemed to be the only person in the House, if not in Northern Ireland, who believed that there was no connection whatsoever between the Belfast Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement and that the architecture, somehow, had been changed fundamentally as a result of what the DUP did — or some would say, failed to do — as part of the St Andrews Agreement. His contribution today could best be described as being on election message; it did not represent hard reality.

Mr Alex Maskey reinforced the view given earlier by Mr O'Dowd. He even mentioned the sham fight. As someone who attends the sham fight in Scarva every year, I have yet to see Mr Maskey witness it. Nevertheless, it was interesting that he mentioned it. He also mentioned the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, and he seemed somewhat irked that that Committee had not been given responsibility for looking at the issues.

Mr Poots acted as a cheerleader for Mr Ross's earlier contribution. The world began at St Andrews as far as the DUP is concerned. Nobody else did anything of any substance before that. Mr Poots said that turkeys in this place could be voting for Christmas and, in the cold reality of day, it will be interesting to see whether that will ever happen.

Mr Elliott brought a sense of proportion back to the debate and reminded us that this place ought to be about delivery and the practical working of politics — real politics and not some of the airy-fairy stuff in the political bubble and froth that we hear and deal with.

I am glad that Mr O'Loan is in his place. I was concerned about one particular section of his contribution where he said that Northern Ireland:

“cannot ever be a normal place.”

I think that I have quoted him accurately. That is entirely the wrong attitude for any Member. We are all here to make Northern Ireland a better place. We are certainly in a better place than that from which we have come, and we look forward in a constructive way. The negative view expressed by Mr O'Loan was a matter of regret, and I hope that he will address it.

Mr Attwood said that it was a matter of political ownership and that the SDLP amendment would be much better and more balanced. However, the Ulster Unionist Party believes that the focus remains, and should remain, with the two parties that currently lead the Executive. They have promised us proposals; let us examine those proposals and keep the focus more narrow at this stage.

Last week, the deputy First Minister called his colleague the First Minister's proposals for cutting Government waste “shallow electioneering”. It would

appear that the deputy First Minister is correct — and he does not often receive praise from me. The Ulster Unionist Party, in its partnership with the Conservative Party, is the only party that can enact real change in the areas that the First Minister was talking about. It is only on the national stage — the United Kingdom stage, of which we are all a part — that we can bring down the cost and size of Government and make a difference to tax bills. The First Minister will realise that in about a year's time.

Of course, the First Minister does not have to do anything about the pledges that he makes now. He can, it seems, quite safely make sweeping statements about all manner of things in relation to Governments and quangos, safe in the knowledge that Sinn Féin will not let him do it. Such grandstanding and headline-grabbing are the stock-in-trade of the Democratic Unionist Party. It is not a party of responsibility but one of cynical political advantage.

My friend the Minister of Health has shown that the Ulster Unionist Party is committed to making and delivering firm policy commitments, including the abolition of prescription charges. We are serious about considering the issue of reducing the size of Government structures, which is why the motion calls for the efficiency review panel to appear from the haze in OFMDFM.

We have not been grandstanding with nonsense figures such as £50 million of savings. We know, and are prepared to say, that any savings will be nothing like that. If the number of MLAs were cut to 72, it would, as we have heard already, save only £4 million. The Finance Minister is staring into a black hole, and having slightly fewer MLAs would provide him with mere pocket money, not the real savings that he has to make. We want to consider reducing the number of MLAs because it is the right thing to do, not because it will solve all our financial problems — it will not.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly supports, in principle, the restructuring of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Assembly in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to update the Assembly on the proposals for the creation of an Efficiency Review Panel, as announced on 9 April 2009, and to agree to implement a review and produce a report on the issue of the number of MLAs and government Departments in the next Assembly, within the next six months.

Adjourned at 4.45 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 19 May 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Ms Ní Chuilín: On a point of order, a Cheann Comhairle. During questions to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure yesterday, Mr McNarry made a comment about my colleague Mr Raymond McCartney, who then asked, on a point of order, whether comments about another Member are appropriate and sought a ruling from the Speaker. Has the Speaker had an opportunity to read yesterday's Hansard report?

Mr Speaker: As the Member knows, I was not in the House yesterday. However, I will read the Hansard report and, if necessary, rule on the matter.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Byron Review

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 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.

Miss McIlveen: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to outline how she is implementing the recommendations from the Byron Review in relation to the safeguarding and protection of children.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to this important motion. The Internet and protecting children are issues that cut across Departments and are pressing for us all. The development of the Internet and new technology has been rapid during the past 10 years. In 1999, 3.2 million UK households had an Internet connection, but today that figure stands at 16.5 million. Ofcom estimates that 67% of the adult population now has Internet access. Internet technology is increasingly available through public Wi-Fi networks, and that, along with the convergence of technologies through the use of Internet-connected games consoles and mobile phones, has changed the way in which our children and young people communicate and socialise.

The Internet is now a significant part of all our children's lives. That technology has brought huge benefits in a vast range of ways. Who among us could imagine life without the ubiquitous mobile phone or without Internet access? Some of my colleagues, dare I say it, blog daily and use Facebook and Twitter. However, for all its benefits, the Internet and new technology bring with them challenges and some risks. They have given those who wish to offend against children new opportunities in a virtual world. Those challenges led the Prime Minister to appoint Dr Tanya Byron to produce a report on Internet safety to help protect children from open access to inappropriate online video and gaming sites.

Last year, the Byron Review made more than 30 wide-ranging recommendations that suggested national and regional action to comprehensively protect children. Although Dr Byron's research findings were mostly drawn from England, the review recognised the global nature of Internet use and, consequently, made a series of UK-wide recommendations, the most significant being the need to create a new UK-wide body to develop strategy and oversee developments.

To protect children online and in a digital environment, Dr Byron's recommendations fell into three broad areas: reducing the availability of harmful and inappropriate material in the most popular parts of the

Internet; restricting children's access to harmful and inappropriate material through work with the industry, parents and children; and working to build children's resilience to the material to which they may be exposed so as to give them confidence and skills in navigating new media.

Delivering that developing agenda in an area of huge and fast-moving change needs co-ordinated actions between the UK Government, who currently have responsibility for reserved and exempted matters such as criminal justice, policing and regulation of the online and digital world, and the Northern Ireland Assembly Departments. Apart from the recommendations in the Byron Review, the Government have taken action to try to make the Internet safer after the high-profile cases and prosecutions that arose from Operation Ore.

New offences in online grooming were introduced in the Sexual Offences Act 2003. The Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre, which is headed by Jim Gamble, an ex-PSNI officer, was established in 2006 to police the virtual world. The CEOP Centre is making significant advances in tracking down online predators. In its second year of operation, it helped the police to arrest 297 people. It also helped to reduce the risk of danger to 131 UK children.

New measures have been introduced to manage convicted sex offenders, and, where necessary, access to computers can be restricted through the use of sex offender prevention orders. New measures in the pipeline at Westminster will further restrict convicted offenders from travelling overseas.

The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) has done much good work with the computer industry and has been very successful in reducing the amount of illegal material that is hosted on UK Internet sites. However, the challenge is immense, and the IWF estimates that overseas Internet service providers host a core of 2,755 child abuse websites.

Despite that progress, the speed of change means that major issues remain, and there is no room for complacency. Peer-to-peer technology and the development of social networking sites, such as Bebo and Facebook, has brought new challenges, with children at risk of placing too much information about themselves on public access sites. We have also witnessed the development of cyberbullying among children using the Internet and SMS. That is one of the most prevalent forms of harm that children experience online, as is the sharing of inappropriate content among children via peer-to-peer and social networking sites.

Making the Internet a safer place is the responsibility of those in positions of leadership. Although Northern Ireland membership of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety will allow us to influence wider UK developments in the regulation of policing, it is at a local level that

we can do much to improve children's resilience and improve their parents' knowledge and capacity to protect them.

Key to and at the forefront of that is the role of education. As a former teacher and as children's spokesperson for the DUP, I have a huge personal interest in that area. Many recommendations in the Byron Review relate specifically to education, and Dr Byron's intention of giving children information and protecting them has huge applicability here. It is up to the Department to provide leadership and to translate that into policy development and firm action.

I am grateful to the NSPCC for providing all Members with a briefing paper on the issue and for distilling some of those issues into possible policy development terms. I shall not repeat those in detail; it is sufficient to say that there is an urgent need to mainstream e-safety at all levels of the curriculum and into all school structures. That will involve oversight by school governors. The key areas include the need to ensure that, as part of the personal development component of the curriculum, children and young people are provided with age-appropriate information and that, most importantly, they are signposted to other sources of help and advice, such as ChildLine.

Teachers also need help with the digital divide that has emerged between the generations. Safety issues relating to the Internet and virtual reality should feature in initial teacher training and in teachers' continuing professional development. Through the extended schools programme, more could be done to work with parents on e-safety.

Child protection policy developments in schools, which the Department has responsibility to oversee, should also include measures on e-safety. The Education and Training Inspectorate should also consider how it might carry out a thematic inspection and review of schools provision. Other measures could be taken, and I shall be interested to hear the contribution of other Members and, of course, the Minister on the issue.

The Byron Review was a start, not an end. In that regard, we need to continuously examine what we are doing in this fast-moving environment. The CEOP Centre, for example, has done some excellent work in schools in Northern Ireland through its Think U Know programme and through the development of accredited trainers. What are the links between the CEOP Centre and education services? Do we know which children have participated in that training and where the gaps are? Is CEOP training factored into wider safeguarding plans for schools?

The need for local and national co-ordination in the area is obvious, and I am aware that Internet safety has featured on the agendas of the ministerial subcommittee for children, the North/South Ministerial

Council and the British-Irish Council. That illustrates the local, regional and international elements of the issue. The ministerial subcommittee is chaired by the junior Ministers, who have Executive responsibility for children. Therefore, it is in an ideal position to co-ordinate the implementation of the recommendations in the Byron Review as they relate to Departments in Northern Ireland.

I would welcome a commitment from the Minister of Education that her Department will conduct a benchmarking exercise in respect of the Byron Review and that an education action plan relating to Internet safety will be presented to the ministerial subcommittee. I am sure that the Committee for Education would welcome an early update from the Minister on progress in that area.

Given that many policy initiatives will also lie with other Departments, particularly the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, it would be useful for Ministers to produce and publish a paper on the implementation of the Byron Review and on the steps that are being taken in Northern Ireland to better protect children. That would help to establish where we are and to feed back into the work of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety by establishing work at a local level.

The debate is important, and much more can be done locally to better protect children. The Department of Education has a crucial role in that regard, along with other Departments, and I hope that the debate will stimulate further policy development and cross-cutting elements. I look forward to the Minister's response and to an implementation of the recommendations.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

I am happy to take part in the debate, and I thank the mover of the motion for bringing the issue to the Floor of the Assembly. I welcome the Minister of Education's attendance. Along with the mover of the motion, I am grateful to the NSPCC for the information and advice that it has provided to me and other Members on Internet safety.

We need to live in the real world. Along with most Members, I was educated without the aid of technology. If I needed to get information for homework — when I did it — I had to go and research it in the library or ask other people for their homework. The world is moving on, and the pace of change in technology in the past 10 to 15 years is unbelievable and shows no signs of letting up. I am sure that some Members cannot work a video recorder, but their children or their grandchildren would be able to show them how to do it.

No one is objecting to the fact that technology has moved on, but we also need to realise that some

people, for their own benefit, use technology to harm children. Young people must be encouraged at every opportunity to get involved in science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects and information and communication technology. However, as a society, we need to be one, two, or even five steps ahead of people who, for their own advantage, use technology to harm children.

10.45 am

The mover of the motion mentioned some figures. It is important to note that 50% of households have Internet access and that 99% of children aged between eight and 17 use the Internet regularly. I do not view that negatively. Much Internet use is positive. The fact that 9% fewer households here have access to the Internet is also interesting. I am keen to find out whether that is due to economic factors. Children who do not have access to a computer or to the Internet at home are at an educational disadvantage.

The subject of the debate is the Byron Report and the use of computers for schoolwork by children and young people. There has been an increase in the number of children and young people who access the Internet and social networking sites through mobile phones and games consoles during their leisure time. As I said earlier, there is no doubt that technology offers opportunities for all people in society, including young people. However, a balance must be struck.

Our focus today is on education. Therefore, I direct my remarks at the Minister of Education and her officials. There is a need to ensure that adults — particularly parents, because they must have responsibility — have the necessary knowledge, skills and understanding to deal with computer issues. Some children have high computer skills. I am amazed at the knowledge that my six-, seven- and eight-year-old nieces and nephews have about computers. It is unbelievable. I bluff and let on that I know more than they do, but I only confuse them.

The tools must be instilled in parents and corporate parents, whether through teachers or other adults who work in settings such as libraries and after-school clubs, to ensure that they keep one step ahead. Sensible ways must be found to highlight potential risks to children and young people. According to NSPCC figures, one in five children has been bullied online on social networking sites. Online predators who seek to groom children are a concern that must also be taken on board. Children can have access to inappropriate content on certain sites, and others encourage and promote harmful behaviour, such as eating disorders and suicide.

Having read Professor Byron's executive summary and recommendations, I believe that she has put forward a comprehensive list of sensible suggestions in her report. I am confident that the Minister of Education will

take those forward in her departmental responsibilities. In her final comments, the mover of the motion accepted that the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people has a focus on this matter. It would be useful if, through you, Mr Speaker, a transcript of the debate were sent to the ministerial subcommittee, because several Ministers have responsibility on the issue. It is important that the Assembly, Executive and Departments take forward those recommendations collectively. I support the motion.

Mr Elliott: At the outset, I want to put on record my thanks to the Members who have brought the motion to the Floor of the House. The Ulster Unionist Party is happy to support the motion and, indeed, the recommendations that have emerged from the Byron Review.

Clearly, much of the focus is on one word: "freedom". Although we all appreciate the threat from modern technology, we accept that it is a feature of the society in which we live, which is based on freedom for children and parents. The unregulated nature of the Internet is both a success and a pitfall. It is absolutely marvellous that one can go on the Internet and get information on almost any topic. However, its pitfalls are the absolute dangers that it presents for children and young people.

I am sure that Damian McBride wishes that there was tighter regulation of online commentary. However, the truth remains that the unimpeded opportunity for expression has provided new prospects in a range of fields.

I support the report's approach, which recognises how the Internet can benefit children and their education. That is vital in today's society. We should not stop children using the Internet to progress or educate themselves. However, parents and teachers must be aware of its dangers. Furthermore, they must be absolutely sure about what their children are doing on the Internet and should try to manage and regulate that usage better. Although people have a responsibility to self-regulate, that does not always work with children.

The protection of children is of paramount concern to everyone in society, and we all want to protect the more vulnerable groups, such as children. The Byron Report approaches the issue from the correct angle and brings many useful recommendations to the table. I am pleased that the Government have accepted all those recommendations. The one that catches my attention is that all computers that are sold to homes should come with parental-control software. It should be as easy as possible for parents to protect their children from undesirable content on the Internet, while allowing them to develop the skills that they will need in the modern workplace. That cannot reasonably be achieved through physical parental supervision, and, therefore, the routine inclusion of adequate software with

every home computer is the best way in which to achieve that balance. Ms Ramsey mentioned balance, which is essential. It is proper to achieve the balance through which children can educate and protect themselves.

Moreover, we must consider the fact that Internet technology is continually changing, and any system that is installed should be adaptable and flexible. I have two young children, aged six and three, so I have personal knowledge of such matters. The amount that my children — especially the six-year-old — know about the Internet and about computers amazes and baffles me. I ask them to operate the DVD player when I want to watch a DVD. I do not even know how to open the machine.

The creation of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety provides an opportunity for a body to consider specifically how to protect children from potentially harmful content. That is a good recommendation, and I am pleased that the Government have moved quickly to introduce it.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member may remember that his party colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Michael McGimpsey, approached Internet providers about the issue of suicide and self-harm. Does he agree that the Executive should use their influence in a joined-up way?

Mr Speaker: The Member may have an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for that comment. Such an approach is essential. We should not consider it a blocking point but an opportunity for all members of the Executive to collaborate on the issue. I have no difficulty with that suggestion.

I look forward to seeing the UK Council for Child Internet Safety's work, which will shape the future regulation of the industry and provide a safe environment in which children can learn new skills in the modern age.

Mrs M Bradley: I thank the Members who tabled this important motion, which my party is happy to support.

The protection of children is paramount to any society's development, and I welcome any means that offers a sound and sensible approach to achieve that end. Dr Tanya Byron, a mother of two, used insight gained from her career as a clinical psychologist to launch her in-depth review, which is titled 'Safer Children in a Digital World'. The junior Ministers welcomed the review and acknowledged its usefulness in establishing e-safety.

In March, in response to a question for written answer that Miss McIlveen asked, the Minister of Education said that her Department:

"is working closely with DHSSPS, and other Departments, to achieve improvement in the current arrangements around internet safety."

I was delighted to hear of the Assembly's inter-departmental approach to an important issue that affects all our children during school hours and when at home in their parents' care.

It is vital that, while children are in school and using the internet for research or educational purposes, they are protected from sites that are easily stumbled on through search engines that do not adequately screen for material that is unfit for viewing by children and young people. It is also, however, socially and morally incumbent on parents and guardians to ensure that they have an increased understanding of the dangers and benefits of the cyberworld and Internet highway.

It is all too easy for a child to input the name of their favourite toy or video game, only to be met with a string of websites that are based wholly on innuendoes and inappropriate material. In today's society, it has become obvious that parental control is diminishing and that it needs to be reborn and emphasised. What better way to start than by ensuring that what our children have access to is suitable for their ears and eyes?

Dr Byron has made eight recommendations in all; four for the video-gaming world and four for the safety of Internet use. I call on the Minister of Education to issue guidance through her Department to schools so that they can implement and, where appropriate, increase the necessary Internet protection measures that will safeguard against the accidental display of or, as in some cases, the deliberate downloading and viewing of inappropriate material.

I note that the Minister of Education informed the House in March that the Department expected to have membership of the Better Education working group, one of four groups established to deal with the full range of the Byron recommendations. I hope that there will be movement on some level towards membership of that group and, more importantly, that the necessary finances to support schools in implementing the appropriate guidelines will be in place. I also hope that we will not be here in another year's time, debating the whys and wherefores of the matter, why the money is needed and where to find it.

Child protection, in whatever form, is essential and welcome. Sadly, it is also a necessary tool in today's society. A number of groups have provided information about cyberbullying. So much of that goes on, and it gives our children and young people great cause for concern. They should have the type of protection that they need.

Mr Ford: In a rare mood of unanimity in the Assembly, I also welcome the debate, and I congratulate Michelle McIlveen and her colleagues on having

secured it. It is clearly an issue that is vital to the future welfare of all our children.

There is no doubt that, throughout the ages, new media have always been greeted with some horror and suspicion; whether the penny dreadful novel or the picture comic. There is also no doubt that we are now moving into relatively uncharted waters when one considers the effect of the Internet and our ability to regulate and to ensure that matters are dealt with in a way that protects children and the most vulnerable in society. That is why there is a need to look at the detail of Professor Byron's report and to focus on helping children to meet new challenges, develop their critical skills and abilities and make decisions. Frankly, we are long past the point where we can simply close the door on what is accessible on the Internet.

As Tom Elliott highlighted, the practical reality is that many young children are far better equipped than we are to deal with technology. I have not yet asked my grandson to work the DVD recorder for me — he is only two months old — but I suspect that I will be doing so in two or three years' time. The problem is that, although the children may have the technological skills, they do not have the understanding. They cannot evaluate how they should be dealing with the Internet, and they need assistance in learning to deal with the challenges that affect them. That is the challenge outlined in the Byron Report, and it is the challenge to which we must all respond and to which we must seek a response across a range of Departments. We need to develop a shared culture of responsibility that will ensure that all those involved in the issue — the industry, education, government, or voluntary organisations — can assist people in reducing the availability of potentially harmful material, and, in particular, assist children in developing the ability to avoid that material.

The problem with the Internet is that there is no single, obvious editorial point of control. There is no way in which national Governments can deal with (ISPs) based all over the world to achieve that level of control. The practical reality that has already been highlighted is that some ISPs attract particular attention from young people. There may be a need to police those sites, as well as to encourage parents not only to get the appropriate software on their computers but to develop the necessary skills to access it and ensure that it can be used to protect children.

11.00 am

Dr Byron proposed a national strategy for child Internet safety that involves self-regulation and provision of information and education for children and families. Sue Ramsey highlighted the cross-departmental nature of that issue, and Mary Bradley said that the junior Ministers welcomed the Byron

Review when it was published. However, the motion highlights the fact that the Department of Education has a significant role to play, and it is important that we consider that.

Although the Byron Review's remit is UK-wide and refers to some extent to English institutions, there is no doubt that it has significant applicability across Northern Ireland as well. Decent guidance and exemplar practice must be evident in every aspect of the curriculum, and teachers must be given the necessary support so that they can assist young people in dealing with the Internet and in learning to use it in a responsible way. That must be a priority in the professional development of teachers. I know that there is a danger in our always saying that teachers have responsibilities on such matters, but there is little point in schools' ensuring that their computers are safe for their pupils to use if they cannot also assist those pupils in being safe when they use computers elsewhere.

The Byron Review refers to Ofsted's role in holding schools to account, which has direct applicability to our schools' inspectorate. That accountability must be encouraged so that we can find ways to ensure that schools live up to those responsibilities that they might otherwise neglect. That is the key to educating young people in future. If we attempt to wrap children in cotton wool, they will never learn to grow up and make the decisions that will help them to survive on their own as they move from adolescence into adult life. We have to find a way of ensuring that that happens in schools and that it is encouraged. In that sense, it is right that the debate focuses on the role of the Minister of Education and her Department. I support the motion.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion. The debate has been useful; it has allowed us to discuss how to protect children against abuses of the Internet. As is the case with many debates in which there is cross-party agreement on an issue, most of what needs to be said has been said. Therefore, I will deviate slightly from the issue of the use of the Internet.

According to the available information, there is still a wide section of society that does not have access to the Internet. Many young people do not have Internet access at home for a variety of reasons, but particularly because of poverty. We must examine how to ensure that as many children as possible have access to the educational resource that is the Internet. It is true that children must be protected and that we must learn from the Byron Review and other international reports on child protection. We must educate and empower their guardians to ensure that the Internet is employed as a useful tool. However, we must also ensure that people have computers and Internet connections in their homes.

Many homes, particularly in rural areas, do not have Internet connections because of the patchy broadband network that exists west of the Bann. The Assembly and the Executive have a responsibility to ensure that broadband is available to all family homes so that children can have proper access to the Internet.

The debate has been useful, and my colleague Sue Ramsey's suggestion that the issue be forwarded to the OFMDFM ministerial subcommittee on children and young people is a good idea. The whole Executive, as well as the Department of Education, have an important role to play. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ar na mallaibh d'fhoilsigh muid ráiteas beartais ar pháistí a chosaint. Is é is cuspóir dó an toradh ar an straitéis 10 mbliana — maireachtáil go slán cobhsaí — a chur chun cinn agus a fhorbairt.

Violence against women and children — whether at home, in society or through the Internet — and the grooming of children are some of the greatest challenges that face our society. Safeguarding and protecting our children is a top priority for me and for my Executive colleagues.

Recently, we published a policy statement on safeguarding children. That statement is intended to develop the aim of ensuring that our children live in safety and with stability, which is an element of the 10-year strategy 'Our Children and Young People — Our Pledge'. That statement sets out a safeguarding policy framework across Government which, in addition to setting out the Government's safeguarding agenda, identifies gaps and suggests new actions to close them. A clear part of that agenda is to take forward the recommendations that Tanya Byron made in her report.

The review was undertaken to help parents and their children get the best from the new technologies while protecting children from inappropriate or harmful material. I support John O'Dowd's comments about access to technology, and Members will know that my Department has provided laptop computers to primary schools in the North of Ireland.

The review team assessed the evidence on the risks that exposure to potentially harmful or inappropriate material on the Internet and in video games poses to children's safety and well-being. The team assessed the effectiveness and inadequacy of existing measures in helping to prevent children being exposed to such material and in helping parents to understand and manage the risks of access to inappropriate content. It then made a series of recommendations on improvements and additional action that should be taken to ensure that children derive maximum advantage from the new technologies in the safest possible way.

Is forleathan agus fairsing iad an moltaí, agus tá comhoibriú de dhíth dóibh idir an rialtas, tionscail, carthannais páistí, seirbhísí reachtúla, chomh maith le tuismitheoirí, páistí agus daoine óga.

The review's recommendations are wide-ranging, and they require co-operation across Government, industry, children's charities and statutory services, as well as from parents, children and young people. The recommendations include the creation of a new Council for Child Internet Safety to lead on the development of a strategy and to oversee its implementation; challenging the industry to take greater responsibility in supporting families through codes of practice on areas such as user-generated content; improving access to parental-control software, which many Members mentioned; safe search features and better regulation of online advertising; a comprehensive public information and awareness campaign on child Internet safety across Government and industry, including an authoritative one-stop shop on child Internet safety; and putting in place sustainable education and initiatives to improve the e-safety skills of children and their parents.

Is léir go leagann na moltaí seo clár oibre síos do gach Roinn, ní amháin don Roinn Oideachais.

It is clear that the recommendations set an agenda for all Departments, not just the Department of Education. However, my Department is clear about its need to play its role. The ministerial subcommittee on children and young people identified the need for safeguarding and for taking forward the Byron Review's recommendations as a priority. A subgroup, which is chaired by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, has been established for that purpose. Through that Department, our interests are represented on the Council for Child Internet Safety and its executive board.

My Department represents our interest on the council's Better Education subgroup, which is tasked with ensuring that children, families and the children's workforce have access to consistent and comprehensive support and to information that improves their knowledge, skills and understanding of Internet safety. As a member of that group, we will be engaged actively in any developments, and we will be in a position to access their appropriateness for application here.

That assessment will also include consideration of the North/South dimension to Internet safety and will ensure compatibility with any developments that emerge from the North/South Ministerial Council's Internet safety subgroup. Following the NSMC meeting that took place in February 2008, it has been agreed that the Department of Health and the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs will co-chair a cross-border group of officials to intensify co-operation on child protection.

Five work streams have been established to oversee various developments. Those include information sharing for children and families, public awareness, and child protection and Internet safety, on all of which the South of Ireland is leading. The North of Ireland is leading on vetting and barring and research.

Our involvement in the Council for Child Internet Safety will ensure that initiatives that are aimed at strengthening Internet safety, such as Safer Internet Day, are shared with colleagues in the South of Ireland. We have already implemented a range of developments and actions, which could, to some extent, be seen to have anticipated outcomes.

Schools are already responding to the challenge of promoting e-safety to pupils. The revised curriculum that I am introducing aims to meet the needs of our young people better and places the development of skills alongside the development of knowledge and understanding. Using ICT is one of three cross-curricular skills to be developed from foundation stage to Key Stage 4.

As part of the revised curriculum, teachers are receiving training and guidance materials to support them in the classroom. That includes guidance at Key Stage 2 on integrating teaching on Internet safety and general online communication into other areas of the curriculum, such as personal development and mutual understanding, which looks at developing a proactive and responsible approach by pupils to safety, including Internet safety.

We must equip our young people with the skills that they need to recognise dangerous or inappropriate situations and to deal with them appropriately. If we do that, we are helping our young people to develop into the confident citizens and individuals that they deserve to be. It is crucial that we build on that approach to empower children and young people if we are to ensure that their generation are new-technology savvy in all respects, can keep themselves safe and can use technology safely.

Reachtálann an Chomhairle Curaclaim, Scrúdúchán agus Measúinithe scéim chreidiúnaithe dheonach ag Eochairchéimeanna 2 agus 3, agus tá sin á síneadh chuig Eochairchéim 1.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) runs a voluntary ICT accreditation scheme at Key Stages 2 and 3, and that scheme has now been extended to Key Stage 1. The scheme also includes e-safety to support teachers and educate pupils. I am also revising the assessment arrangements in line with the revised curriculum and will be introducing levels of progression to help teachers to assess pupil achievement by the end of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 in cross-curricular skills, including the use of ICT.

E-safety is a component in the levels of progression for the use of ICT.

We have been encouraging school staff to improve their capacity to promote e-safety through participation in the local training that the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre provides. The centre regularly offers sessions of its ambassador course, which provides an in-depth look into new mobile technology and how it can be used to put children at risk. The centre also provides Think U Know training, which equips staff to deliver the centre's programme for 11-year-olds to 16-year-olds on keeping safe in the online and mobile environments.

Maidir le feabhsú ríomh-shábháilteachta na scoile ina hiomlán, baineann cuid mhór scoileanna úsáid as an chreatlach fhéin-athbhreithnithe Becta le monatóireacht agus measúnú a dhéanamh ar theicneolaíocht faisnéise agus cumarsáide ar fud an churaclaim, mar a mhol Byron.

Schools here are required to have a policy on safe and effective use of the Internet and other digital-technology tools. The Department of Education circular 2007/1 from 18 June 2007 drew attention to the wide range of issues that schools' policies should address and directed schools to advice on what is regarded as best practice. Access to the guidance is available on the Department of Education's website and is regularly updated.

The Classroom 2000 (C2k) network provides schools with Internet access. That access is fully monitored and is subject to a detailed filtering policy, which categorises websites into groups that are allowed and those that are not. The filtering process is updated several times each day on the basis of requests from schools and the appearance of new sites.

I thank my officials for their work on the issue. My Department takes Internet safety very seriously; we welcome any suggestions in this debate, and we welcome the ongoing consultation with schools. We all have a responsibility to ensure that we protect our children, because schools cannot do it on their own. They need to act in conjunction with all other Departments and consult on an all-island basis, as well as with their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Storey: I thank my colleague Michelle McIlveen for bringing the motion to the House.

I do not think that any Member who listened to the debate and read all the material that was provided for it would underestimate the importance of the issue.

11.15 am

One of my constituents, who has several grandchildren, telephones me weekly, if not daily, to discuss child protection. He is appalled and concerned by what he sees every day in the local and national media. The one

issue about which he always asks when he telephones is what we are doing about child protection.

We are all very good at saying that it is someone else's responsibility. It would be easy to come to the House and try to make a political point from this issue. At a time when many people out there are questioning all that is going on with MPs' expenses and the value of the democratic process, is rhetoric all that we — every party in this House, collectively — have to offer the people of Northern Ireland about what should be done to safeguard children? We need to prove to the people what is being done. I will come to the Minister's comments in a moment, but we need to set this vital issue in that context.

As the parent of a young family who has had to deal with the issue with my own son, I know that safeguarding children is a vital issue, and we have to get to grips with it. Michelle McIlveen, the proposer of the motion, reminded us of the Byron Review's 30 recommendations and the three areas of work that the report considered. She also emphasised the importance of CEOP and said that it would have a vital role in what would be delivered.

The speed of change, the proposer reminded us, requires a rapid response. This issue is changing almost daily. Mainstream Internet safety in schools needs to be addressed. Last year, the Department of Education spent about £50 million on IT. Surely a priority for some of that funding should be child safety.

Sue Ramsey praised the work of the NSPCC. The charity is to be commended for how it has presented the public with the stark reality and the statistics behind the issue. We are glad that NSPCC representatives are in the Public Gallery today. I trust that they will take some solace and comfort from the tone of the debate, and from the House's unanimity on the matter, as the honourable Member for South Antrim Mr Ford remarked.

Sue Ramsey reminded us of the responsibility of parents. That is a key issue. It is sometimes difficult to quantify, but many parents are disengaged from a lot of these things. We have all been guilty, at some stage in our parental duties, of not paying attention to what is going on in the room that has Internet access and of not making enquiries. That is because, as some Members have said, we are sometimes not very competent with the technology ourselves. There is a fear on our part. Being educated about the technology is, therefore, relevant not only to children but to parents.

Sue Ramsey referred to the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. The Minister said that that group has set up another subgroup to examine this issue. Those groups must play an important role in this debate.

Tom Elliott reminded us of the focus on the word "freedom". We now have a society in which there is

freedom, but that has brought with it many challenges. He underscored the unregulated nature of the Internet and its pitfalls. He also reassured the House that the protection of children is paramount in the minds of all Members.

Mary Bradley reminded us of the Education Minister's response to a question for oral answer from my colleague who proposed the motion. We need to revisit some of the statements that Ministers make during Question Time, because a lot of mist circulates around the Chamber, and it is easy to ask a question, but more difficult to get an answer and to see where that answer is leading us. Nevertheless, bearing in mind the Minister's response to that question for oral answer, Mrs Bradley called for schools to receive guidance, as well as the appropriate finance to ensure that it can be implemented.

My colleague David Ford talked about uncharted waters, and he could not have summarised the challenge that faces us in a better way. These are uncharted waters for all of us. It was important that he placed an emphasis on the national strategy, which is a key issue. The Minister is always keen to remind us of our all-Ireland responsibilities. However, in the United Kingdom, across England, Scotland and Wales, in the Republic of Ireland, and further afield in the European Union, there is a responsibility to ensure that, at every level of government and at every level of political administration, there are more than mere platitudes on this issue, but a requirement to have in place proper procedures, security and guidelines that can be implemented for the safety of our children.

Mr Ford also made an interesting comment about the role of Ofsted. We should encourage that body to be more proactive and to take on the responsibility of policing the protections that are in place, and of policing the methods and guidelines that are set before people who have access to the Internet.

By the time of John O'Dowd's contribution, nearly all the points had been covered, but that sometimes happens in debates when a Member is fifth, sixth or seventh in line to speak. Contributions can become difficult and repetitious. That has never stopped us in the past, but it is a challenge for us all. Nevertheless, John O'Dowd made a valuable contribution on Internet access, which represents the other side of the coin. There are pitfalls, problems and challenges, but we need to protect our children. Many children have benefited as a result of having Internet access, but some children do not have the same access that others enjoy. That must be addressed.

I welcome the Minister's statement that safeguarding and protecting children is a top priority for her Department. She referred to the reviews that had taken place, and I confess that I got lost amid the Minister's

statement, because a list of reviews was mentioned, which became a long catalogue of very detailed recommendations. We all want to see actions and outcomes as a result of that work.

The Minister referred to the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. We need to scrutinise exactly what is happening to see whether we are on track for the right outcome. The Minister referred to encouraging teachers to take up training, but we must look at making that a more formal process, rather than just providing encouragement, and putting in place a process so that teachers can have access to and engage in that training.

I welcome the debate. I congratulate all the Members who have spoken and I thank them for supporting the motion, which I commend to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to outline how she is implementing the recommendations from the Byron Review in relation to the safeguarding and protection of children.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Juvenile Justice System

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

Ms S Ramsey: I beg to move

That this Assembly, following the recent United Nations Committee on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC) Report, notes the concerns expressed regarding young people in the juvenile justice system; and calls on the Northern Ireland Office and the Executive to set out what actions they will be taking to address these concerns.

I take the opportunity to thank the Business Committee for selecting this motion for debate in the Assembly. Although the motion focuses on the Executive and the NIO, I welcome the junior Minister to the debate. It will be interesting to hear his response.

Young people who have committed a serious crime must go through the court process and receive a sentence that reflects the crime of which they have been found guilty. Today's debate is not on the nature of sentences or what constitutes a fit sentence for a particular offence, regardless of who has committed it. The debate is on what happens to young people when they enter the juvenile justice system and how to ensure that they are less likely to commit further offences when they leave, rather than more likely, as research has shown that they are.

The rate of reoffending among those in the juvenile justice system is high. Research suggests that almost three quarters of young people under the age of 25 are likely to be reconvicted within two years of leaving the system. Research also shows that the one-year reoffending rate of youths discharged from custody is 70%. That suggests the system's failure to address the underlying causes of young people's offending or offer them a clear path to rehabilitation and a new life.

The juvenile justice system must be changed to ensure that it promotes the rehabilitation of young people in its care, and that cannot be achieved through a punitive or bullying approach. Young people of 14 or 17 years of age must not be abandoned to a life of offending, because an opportunity exists to change their lives by giving them the right support and chances.

A number of recent inspection reports have raised serious concerns about young people in the juvenile justice system. The inspections of Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre and Hydebank Wood young offenders' centre identified a range of issues on which the centres fell far below the level of best practice, with Hydebank Wood seeming to contravene the basic human rights of young people.

I welcome the British Government's withdrawal of their reservation to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child regarding holding children in adult prisons. Unfortunately, that seems not to apply to the 17-year-olds who are being held in Hydebank Wood young offenders' centre. The centre is operated by the Prison Service and accommodates young men between 17 and 21 years of age. Although those aged 17 are held on a separate landing, they are in the same block as adults, and they are held in a facility run by the Prison Service and according to its rules.

The recent inspection report raised serious concerns, such as the lack of an adequate child protection policy and the fact that only 23 of the 39 staff who work with the young people had received any training in child protection. The report also highlighted a culture that, on reception, was described as "intimidating and inappropriate" for juveniles. The reception process included the routine strip-searching of all juveniles, with some searches being carried out by a single officer. Only 39% of the young people had been able to make a phone call to their family or a friend on their first night in detention.

The inspection also found little effective response to bullying, and inspectors stated that they witnessed an incident of bullying by a senior member of staff. Some bullying was not investigated, and over 39% of the young people said that they had felt unsafe while in the young offenders' centre.

The inspection further identified the use of inappropriate punishment methods for young people, including lengthy confinement in cells and stopping their use of the telephone to contact family. One child was held for six weeks in conditions that could be regarded as cellular confinement and was unable to communicate with his mother for four weeks.

11.30 am

Of most concern was the notion of young people being confined to their cells for considerable periods of the day with very little provision for education or for useful, work-based skills. Only 15% of young people were taking part in education, and only 15% were learning a skill or trade. However, 62% of the young people said that they needed help with reading, writing and maths, for which many were on a waiting list. That does not simply contravene young people's basic human rights; it is ineffective in ensuring that they do not reoffend and prevents them from finding the skills and support that they need to become usefully involved in society.

What steps will the NIO and the First Minister and deputy First Minister take to ensure that young people are either moved from Hydebank Wood to Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre or are provided with dedicated accommodation? The issue of ensuring that child

protection policies are followed through on must also be addressed if we are to meet the needs of children and young people.

Between January 2006 and October 2007, 655 children and young people aged up to 17 were admitted to Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre. The proportion of young people sent to juvenile justice centres here is broadly similar to that in England and Wales, despite recognition that that figure is high in an international context. I am concerned that 48% of those young people were placed in juvenile justice custody under the (PACE) scheme. That indicates that, despite signing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, we are not complying with the undertaking in it to detain young people only as a measure of last resort. PACE can be used to hold a child until a court appearance when they are charged with an offence and bail cannot be granted or a place of safety found. PACE is not widely used for that purpose in England. That is an issue that we must consider.

Another concern is the proportion of young people from care backgrounds who are taken into custody. In 2006-07, 30% of children aged 10 to 17 who were in custody came from a care background. Young people here who are looked after have, on average, twice as many admissions to custody as those from the general population.

An estimated 75% of looked-after children who enter secure accommodation already have a criminal conviction. If he can do so, the junior Minister must clarify with the NIO when it intends to deal with section 56 of the Justice Act 2002, because that allows for a child aged between 10 and 13 who is subject to a custody care order to be placed in secure accommodation rather than in a juvenile justice centre. Some of those issues were raised in last week's Assembly debate on children missing from care, and the difficulties faced by children in the care system were highlighted.

People who work with children in the care system daily, either directly or indirectly, have told me that secure accommodation is already under considerable stress. That is something that we see regularly and often hear on the news. Sometimes a bed cannot be found for even the most vulnerable of our young people. That is another issue that the Executive must take on board. I hope that the junior Minister will raise some of the matters highlighted today with his Executive colleagues so that they can address the pressures on secure accommodation for our most vulnerable young people.

We must draw attention to prevention. I have focused on the experience of young people in the juvenile justice system, but it would be much more effective to keep them out of that system and to reduce the rate of offending. It is vital to work with young people at an early stage in their communities to address behaviour

that could escalate into offending. That means doing preventative work on the ground that addresses young people's needs in their communities, families and schools. Often, young offenders have been excluded from school or are not in education, training or employment. They frequently have family problems, and some come from the most disadvantaged of communities.

In conclusion, I thank the junior Minister and his colleague, Mr Donaldson, for their personal interest in the issue, and I know that junior Minister Kelly has visited some of the institutions involved on a number of occasions. What we need, however, is a response from the Executive that spells out exactly what pressure they are placing on the NIO. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Miss McIlveen: I read through the report by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the various submissions that relate to the juvenile justice system in Northern Ireland. The UNCRC has thrown up a number of recommendations that, I am sure, many people in Northern Ireland would find difficult to accept, as well as some that we acknowledge should be in place. I do not wish to detract from much of what was said by the mover of the motion; I will look specifically at the report. I was drawn to the very last recommendation in particular, which is that the state party should conduct an independent review of (ASBOs) with a view to abolishing their application to children.

It was interesting to see that Save the Children and the Children's Law Centre submitted the 'Northern Ireland NGO Alternative Report', in which issues regarding ASBOs were raised. Alternative reports are a very important part of the human rights oversight procedure, and any (NGO) should undertake that role with the responsibility that it deserves. In this instance, I do not believe that the NGOs that were involved in the preparation of the report presented an accurate reflection of the facts regarding ASBOs. There are two types of ASBO: one is applied for through the civil courts, and the other is granted as part of a criminal sentence. That was not made clear in the alternative report. Later in the report there is a vague reference to their use in sentencing, but, when the report first defines ASBOs, it quite explicitly states that they are civil orders.

The NGO report categorically states that proceedings that relate to the breach of an ASBO do not attract the protections of the criminal justice system. That is quite wrong. If there is a breach of an ASBO, it is treated as the breach of a court order and is dealt with through the criminal courts, which is the same way that a breach of a non-molestation order is treated. The NGO report claims that antisocial behaviour is not a criminal act and, therefore, a child should not run the risk of a custodial sentence. However, it is the breach of an order that attracts a sentence, not the behaviour itself.

The report also claims that the ASBO procedure is a breach of a child's rights under article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights, as set out in the Human Rights Act 1998, as there is a denial of a fair trial. Again, that is inaccurate. Civil cases attract the fair trial rights outlined in article 6(1), and there is no case law to back up the NGO's claim that stand-alone ASBOs breach that provision. In fact, the opposite is, perhaps, the case.

Furthermore, the NGO report equates an ASBO that could form part of a sentence with a release under licence. It claims that that is a condition that is normally imposed on individuals who have committed the most serious crimes. However, any individual who is sentenced to imprisonment and is released on a date before the completion of that sentence will be on licence for the remainder of the term in any event. The implication of the NGO report is that no such licence exists except in the most serious cases: that is patently incorrect and misleading. The NGOs did not advise UNCRC of the fact that a (CJINI) report in 2008 stated that ASBOs had been used sensibly and proportionately in Northern Ireland since they had been introduced.

The Beijing rules suggest that the ideal age of criminal responsibility is between 14 and 16 years of age. The recommendation of the UNCRC is that the UK should progressively raise the age of criminal responsibility to reach that so-called ideal. As a party, we have made it clear that, at this time, we do not feel that there is a need to raise the age of criminal responsibility. We certainly feel that raising it to 14, 16 or even 18, as some NGOs in Northern Ireland want, is wholly inappropriate and not in the public interest. Of course, there is no direct domestic sanction for failure to comply with that recommendation and no direct means for enforcement.

The UNCRC report and the NGO alternative report highlight the fact that there is a lack of understanding and, perhaps, a lack of information available to young people who are engaged in the youth justice process. It is imperative that young people understand the system, including what is happening to them and their rights. It is evident that a great deal of work has been undertaken to reform the youth justice system in Northern Ireland. I think that it is the will of everyone in this Assembly to ensure that young people who are involved in the system are treated in a manner that befits their age and, of course, their vulnerability. However, that should not, in any way, result in them failing to be held accountable for their actions.

Mr Kennedy: I am pleased to be able to make a contribution to this important debate. However, criminal justice is not a devolved responsibility of this Assembly, so the competence of the motion has to be questioned.

It may well be that responsibility for criminal justice will be devolved at some point, but we are considerably undermined by the fact that no justice Minister is in place today to reply to the debate. There is a tendency for Members to let off steam and to treat the issue as a hobby horse. However, the public should be aware that, at present, the Assembly has no remit to impact on those charged within the criminal justice system, and we remain spectators in that matter.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The motion is competent. Although the Member is right that justice powers need to be transferred at a later date, the Executive do have a responsibility. The Member's colleague Michael McGimpsey is responsible for the health of all people, including prisoners and children in the juvenile justice system. The Member needs to check that fact.

Mr Speaker: The Member may have an extra minute.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the Member's advice. However, the harsh reality is that this debate is an opportunity for political parties to grandstand, which some people appear to be good at, in advance of an election.

Juvenile crime and justice are emotive matters. With the rise in teenage crime, many people feel that the criminal age of responsibility should be going down rather than up. Some crimes carried out by comparatively young teenagers are horrific, and that is bound to prompt us to ask what is wrong with our society. We all have views on that. Some people blame the influence of television, be it satellite or terrestrial, computer games and the wider celebrity culture that now exists whereby little-known people make themselves famous through reality television programmes such as 'Big Brother' or 'Britain's Got Talent'.

Ms S Ramsey: What about 'Stormont Live'?

Mr Kennedy: 'Stormont Live' cannot be described as entertainment by any stretch of the imagination.

Many people feel that we have entered into a new culture that is not conducive to good behaviour and proper respect. On the other hand, it is important that we do not demonise young people or tar the vast majority of them with a brush that should be reserved for the criminal few.

The bill of rights for Northern Ireland will propose raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 16 and then to 18, prompting concerns that teenage criminals will escape prosecution. If the proposals in the final report of the working group tasked with making recommendations on the content of the bill of rights are passed, potentially no one under the age of 18 will be prosecuted for acts of criminality. That controversial move comes at a time when the public is calling for tougher measures to deal with violent youths and youth crime. That group recommends

raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 16, with a view to increasing it to 18 over a period. A campaign to raise the age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales has been consistently opposed by most sensible people. The murder of Liverpool toddler Jamie Bulger a number of years ago at the hands of two 10-year-old boys is often cited as an example of why the law should be retained in its present form. There are shocking crimes —

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: No; sorry. I have already given way. Even in Northern Ireland, shocking crimes such as rape are taking place. Those crimes are unacceptable and are regarded as such by the vast majority of people. Those serious crimes cannot be dealt with simply through some form of counselling or arbitration.

Some sanctions have to be in place so that young people or anyone of any age are aware of their responsibilities. That is the reason that the Ulster Unionist Party is opposed to the motion.

11.45 am

Mrs D Kelly: The SDLP supports the motion, and I am pleased to be taking part in the debate.

Incarcerating children is no solution to crime. Some regions of the UK have the lowest age of criminal responsibility, and some people might say that that is a crime in itself. Two or three months ago, there were 40 incarcerated children in the North of Ireland. I have visited the juvenile justice centre at Bangor, and that visit is not something that I want to repeat or would wish on any 10-year-old child.

Many Members referred to parental responsibility. I believe in parental responsibility, but some Members must realise that home is not a safe place for many children and young people. Although Members are right to say that juvenile justice is not yet a devolved matter, there is an onus on the Executive to accept responsibility for supporting parents, children and young people and to invest in our children and young people. The costs that are incurred must also be considered. It costs over £200,000 a year to keep one child in the juvenile justice system. Could that money not be put to much better use if it were invested in developing our young people and children?

I recognise the dilemma of trying to balance the needs of the community and dealing with antisocial behaviour, but locking up children is not the answer. If Members ever have the opportunity to talk to prisoners from across the prison population, they will hear that many of them were imprisoned for minor misdemeanours; in fact, some people are locked up for the non-payment of fines. Many of those people come out of prison as hardened criminals who know a lot more about how to abuse the system, and they engage in more crime than

they did previously. There is little resettlement of and rehabilitation for released prisoners.

It is often said that a society is judged by how it treats its prisoners. How much more harshly will we be judged if we do not treat our children and young people properly?

In 2008, the North, as part of the UK, was subject to a state party examination on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The committee made a number of recommendations in its concluding observations. Among the committee's concerns on juvenile justice was the age of criminal responsibility here. The committee said that 10 was too low — a view supported by the SDLP — and recommended that it be raised.

In response to the concerns of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, in March 2009, the Scottish Parliament launched proposals to raise the age of criminal responsibility from eight to 12. Proposals relating to a bill of rights for Northern Ireland also highlighted the need to raise the age of criminal responsibility. Although I accept that there was a divergence of views at the Bill of Rights Forum, I believe in the basic premise that the age of 10 is entirely wrong.

Too many children are in custody or on remand. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child also recommended that alternatives to detention be developed. In its policy paper on juvenile justice, the SDLP proposed that alternatives be developed to prevent children and young people from coming into contact with the juvenile justice system. Children who are at risk of offending should be given appropriate support and intervention to prevent them offending. Custody should be used only as a last resort for children.

Children who are in custody do not have a statutory right to education, and the SDLP believes that a child who is in detention should have that right. Those children should also have access to the full Northern Ireland curriculum. If young people had such a right, they would be better prepared for reintegration into society. That would also have a positive impact on lowering reoffending rates.

I welcome the Government's commitment to remove the reservation of article 37(c) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children in detention should be accommodated separately from adults.

It is imperative that we get this right. We are seeing already the resurgence of terror groups making judgements on our children and young people, and we see already cases of young people being exiled or beaten up in so-called punishment beatings. Surely that is wrong. Surely the onus is on the Executive and

Assembly to invest to secure much better outcomes for the children who need our help most.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party welcomes the debate and has no difficulty in supporting the motion. The motion is competent; there are plenty of precedents for the House's debating subjects that are not its immediate responsibility. Even beyond that, issues that relate to offending in Northern Ireland require a joined-up response from government agencies, both devolved and non-devolved.

The Department of Education and its Youth Service have a clear responsibility to deal with offending through how they interact with young people. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Social Development, which is responsible for housing, also have cross-cutting responsibilities in that area. It is not simply a criminal justice issue but one that affects a wide range of Departments and us all. That is why it is important that the Executive respond, and I welcome the presence of junior Minister Kelly in the Chamber.

Thus far, I have found much of the debate to be frustrating, owing to some of the comments that Members have made and tangents that they have followed. The motion does not ask the House to endorse all the recommendations in the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child's report; it asks that we take on board the report and respond to it. The motion is pitched at a wholly appropriate level.

Members have become distracted by talking about the age of criminal responsibility. I have no appetite for changing that. That is not on the agenda; it is a large red herring. The issue is not so much the age of criminal responsibility — we cannot run away from the fact that young people must be held to account when they commit offences — as what happens when young people are held to account for offences and the state's approach, whether it be custodial sentencing or something else, such as the use of youth conferencing facilities.

It is important that we avoid making generalisations when talking about young people. Young people and their contribution to crime are feared. Not all young people are a threat. Sometimes, young people's actions can be wrongly perceived as a threat when they are simply behaving as young people do and, in many respects, finding themselves. Equally, it is important to bear in mind that young people are the most likely victims of crime, so the issue cuts both ways.

The focus must be on rehabilitating rather than punishing young people. We want to avoid a situation in which young people needlessly get criminal records that compromise their future life opportunities and that entail a cost to society as a whole. We can reflect on the contributions made to society by people in many

respectable walks of life who got into trouble when they were young. We can point to many famous cases.

Members rightly talked about the levels of reoffending among young people and the need to manage as effectively as possible the process of dealing with them. Aspects of what we do in Northern Ireland are world-class, and it is important to highlight that. The Youth Justice Agency is a truly pioneering agency that is setting the pace. Youth conferencing is very successful. My constituency office borders the Youth Justice Agency's community services office in Bangor, and I am fully aware of the work that people such as Phelim Breen and his team do. Restorative techniques can make a difference to young people.

Likewise, I have concerns about the police's ability to issue cautions. Sometimes, cautions can be the most effective response to crime, but the current protective relationship that the police have with the (PPS) means that their flexibility to respond is not as clear-cut as it should be. In some cases, there is no flexibility at all, and that represents a missed opportunity.

The bottom line is that, in some cases, people need to be taken into custody, and we should not run away from that fact. The simple governing motivation behind that is the protection of society, and we have no choice. My party's view is that people under 18 years of age should be sent, by default, to Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre. I have visited both Woodlands and Hydebank Wood young offenders centre, which have very different regimes. The Youth Justice Agency governs one, and the Northern Ireland Prison Service governs the other. I am impressed by what I have seen at the Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre, where there is a more appropriate regime for young people who, unfortunately, have to be placed in custody.

This is an important debate, and it should lead to other debates in the Chamber. Responsibility for this matter lies not only with the justice system, but across all Departments.

Mr Shannon: A report from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child states that childhood lasts until a person reaches 18 years of age. In some circumstances, people who have a disability or who are in care have their rights extended until they reach 21 years of age. In 2005, it was estimated that 434,780 children under the age of 18 were living in Northern Ireland. Those are background facts. As with most reports, it contains recommendations that are necessary and some that are unnecessary.

Raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to ensure that it is in line with England should be looked at, but to raise it to 14, as has been suggested, is possibly going too far. There are suggestions that could be beneficial, but other recommendations in the report are not only unnecessary but harmful, such as outlawing

the right of parents to moderately smack their child for bad behaviour. An abuser will not stop beating a child because smacking has been outlawed. That will affect the everyday parent who taps a child on the leg or the hand to reinforce a point. The money that has been spent already by Patricia Lewsley is a waste of precious resources, and I told her so at a meeting of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. However, that is for another day and another debate.

It is important to realise that Northern Ireland has implemented many effective reforms of youth justice. New ways of dealing with children who offend have been developed, including the youth conferencing service, which is an alternative to prosecution that allows young people to take responsibility for their actions. That process also gives victims an opportunity to say how they have been affected and to develop an agreed plan to redress the harm that has been done. New reparation and community responsibility orders have also been introduced to provide the courts with further alternatives to custody. Those orders encourage children to take responsibility for making up to their victims for their actions or by doing community service.

The Anti-social Behaviour (Northern Ireland) Order 2004 introduced anti-social behaviour orders or ASBOs, as they are generally known. Since then, of the 40 ASBOs reported to the Northern Ireland Office, 17 have been made in respect of children. There has been a fivefold increase in funding for projects that work with young people who are at risk of involvement or further involvement in crime, as well as an increase in support for voluntary and non-governmental organisations to enhance capacity to advocate on behalf of marginalised young people. Custody for children is regarded as a last resort and is reserved for serious and persistent offenders only. The arrest, detention or imprisonment of children is governed by laws that take account of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children can be detained only under specific circumstances laid down in law.

The review made 294 recommendations, some of which pertain to youth justice. Almost all the recommendations have been taken forward with the introduction of new legislation as necessary, including the establishment of the Youth Justice Agency in 2003 as an executive agency within the Northern Ireland Office; the provision for a more effective focus on offending by children; further emphasis on community-based rather than custodial interventions; the closure of unsuitable facilities for children; and the building of a new state-of-the-art juvenile justice centre. Those recommendations have been implemented already.

We should remember that the young people in question are not adults and should not be treated as such.

Nevertheless, they know that what they have done is wrong and that they should face the consequences.

A few Christmases ago, a young man was stabbed in Newtownards and another young man was injured. That incident could have been prevented if the cautioning that had occurred earlier had been acted on. There have been occasions when the police have cautioned a young person and there have been no consequences. Those young people may feel untouchable until, suddenly, they face a future in prison. The juvenile system worked in the case of the stabbing in Newtownards. The young man went through rehabilitation, went back into the community and came to realise that what he had done was wrong. Through a correct balance of restriction and rehabilitation, he now knows what society will and will not accept. Such young people should not be treated like 10-year-olds; they know what is right and what is wrong. The simple fact is that the longer we ignore bad behaviour in society, the worse it will become.

That is why I believe that the system and restrictions that we have in place are not an offence against human rights; they are a way of safeguarding other people's rights, while saving and rehabilitating the young person's life. When wrong is done, it must be acknowledged and punished.

12.00 noon

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

Mr Shannon: We may raise a generation that is not accountable for doing wrong, or that does not understand what wrong is.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Shannon: Although the system is not perfect, we are finding a balance. We will continue to improve our rehabilitation and correctional structures.

Ms Purvis: I support the motion. I recently visited the Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre in Bangor, and it is worth noting that we have some very dedicated people working in the juvenile justice system in Northern Ireland, at Woodlands, Hydebank Wood and other facilities. They work hard to deliver services and support of a high standard. Their work is critical, and conditions are often difficult. A factor that makes their jobs challenging is the relatively high numbers of children in custody in Northern Ireland, even when the children are held only for short periods.

According to both our standards and those set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, custodial sentences for juveniles are supposed to be measures of last resort, restricted to occasions when an individual is deemed to be a risk to the community or to themselves. The best interest of the child is supposed to be the guiding principle. However, that is not the

case in practice. Despite being a recently built facility, Woodlands often struggles to accommodate high numbers of children in custody, including 17-year-olds.

Custody is not the ideal arrangement for many young people who end up in those facilities. It is also expensive, as other Members have said. It is not a good use of resources; a better use is the funding of support and community-based diversion programmes for young people, which keep them out of custody and away from the criminal justice system.

The behaviour of children and young people in Northern Ireland is becoming increasingly criminalised, no doubt helped along by Mr Nolan plc. The age of criminal responsibility in this country is 10. On that subject, we must draw an important distinction between responsibility and criminality. All those under the age of 18 must be treated as juveniles at every stage of the criminal justice process. We need to ensure that no child under 18 is treated as an adult, irrespective of the circumstances or gravity of the offence. In difficult circumstances, when a particularly shocking offence has taken place, there is a temptation, and often an overwhelming desire, to “lock them up and throw away the key” — to use the most punitive measure possible. However, that is why we have set up a criminal justice system: to provide an independent perspective that delivers justice, rather than vengeance, which is often the temptation.

The solution to that situation is to keep children out of the criminal justice system by ensuring that we do all that we can to keep them away from offending behaviour. There must be a greater emphasis on early intervention, alternatives to formal prosecution and sentencing, support for families and young people in crisis, and community-based diversion and activities for young people. We also need to see more intervention when young people are in custody to prevent the revolving-door syndrome, where people come out and go straight back in again. We also need to be honest about the role of the education system in alienating young people. If a child is told at the age of 11 that not much is expected of him or her, which course do we expect them to choose, further education or further rejection?

On my recent visit to Bangor, I heard from a number of young people that the education that they received in custody was the best that they had ever encountered. Learning disabilities, dyslexia and dyspraxia were diagnosed and dealt with, and children received education at a level and in subjects that kept them interested and encouraged them to progress.

I support the motion and hope that the Executive will work quickly to address those concerns.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this motion.

I have serious reservations about the entire criminal justice system. There is a perception in our community and society that people are not justly punished for their crimes. There is a complete focus on the rights of the people who perpetrate crimes, and little focus or regard for the victims of crimes.

Those people deserve a voice. Seventy per cent of the juvenile offenders who serve custodial sentences reoffend. The issue is that if we try to change the juvenile justice system by saying that people should not be put in prison, we are saying to society that —

Mrs D Kelly: The people to whom the Member is referring are children aged 10 and over. As regards the criminal justice system letting victims down, does the Member accept that the Public Prosecution Service is, to a large extent, letting people down when it withdraws cases at the last minute, including those relating to terrorism?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute to speak.

Mr B McCrea: The honourable Member knows that I share her concern about issues relating to the Public Prosecution Service. I want to find the most effective intervention possible in order to spare society from crime and its consequences.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way because I am conscious that Members have only five minutes in which to speak in debates such as this. If the Member had been present in the Chamber for the start of the debate, he would know that when I moved the motion, I said that anyone who commits a crime should be dealt with by the courts and punished accordingly. I tried to highlight the issue of how society treats people who have been convicted of a crime.

If we were talking about the treatment of adults, Mr McCrea, like other Members, would be complaining about the system. We want to ensure that preventative measures are put in place so that juvenile offenders do not reoffend. However, the Member is right to say that juveniles who offend should be convicted and should be given the proper punishment.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to Ms Ramsey for clarifying those points. I apologise that I was not here for the start of this important debate. I asked to speak in the debate because it is about an important matter; and you, Mr Speaker, kindly agreed to allow me to speak.

The issue is not about divergence over what should happen; it is about the way in which we should go about making things happen. Regrettably, many 14-year-olds create a lot of mayhem in our society. They must be punished and be seen to be punished, and I make no apologies for using the word “punished”.

Ms Purvis: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: Since it is Ms Purvis, I will give way.

Ms Purvis: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he acknowledge the fact that youth conferencing, community restorative justice and other practices have been proven to reduce recidivism and offending behaviour more than custodial sentences?

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for her intervention. She is right, and I agree with her. The problem is that the public do not see that. People lack trust in the criminal justice system. They do not understand the situations in which sentencing is not appropriate. When offenders are released either early or at the weekend, the crime rate often rises. The Assembly must address the problem of public trust and confidence.

We simply cannot say that all our attention should be focused on the perpetrators of crime. The victims of crime are just as important, if not more so, and they are being failed fundamentally by every single element of the criminal justice system. It is not right that 40% of files are returned to the police and that no further action is taken. It is not right that people get off with minimal sentences and are allowed to go out and reoffend. It is also not right that a person in the state's care is not recognised as having a mental-health problem or attention deficit disorder and that their condition is not dealt with. Society must deal with those issues.

It is not good enough to simply point the finger at the juvenile justice system and say that it has to improve. The issue is fundamental to democracy: respect for law and order is the very basis of why we are here. If we cannot convince the people of Northern Ireland that we are up to the job, this place is finished.

It is time that we started to talk about those issues, stand up for victims and put perpetrators in jail and make sure that they serve a proper sentence that people know about. I oppose the motion.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly): I shall speak a little lower and hope that the House can hear me. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the debate. I thank the Members who tabled the motion; it has been an interesting debate.

As Danny Kennedy pointed out, the administration of juvenile justice is a reserved matter and responsibility lies with the NIO. However, the junior Ministers have responsibility for the co-ordination of policy on children and young people's issues, so we have a particular interest in the subject. Dolores Kelly and other Members mentioned that. It is also a matter that the Executive and the Assembly will want to consider in due course, when policing and justice moves across and becomes our responsibility.

It must be recognised that for young people who are engaged with the juvenile justice system, offending behaviour is only one aspect of their lives, and it is an outcome that has been impacted upon by many factors. There are very real issues around education, health and links to the care system that require urgent redress through prevention, intervention and rehabilitation. Some Members have made opposing points, but we are united on the fact that we are dealing with understanding what prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation entail. Therefore, we must ensure that we remain aware of the issues and maintain and enhance the relevant links across Departments and with the NIO to effectively tackle those challenging issues in a holistic way.

On several occasions, I have met the Minister of State with responsibility for criminal justice, Paul Goggins, and I have discussed concerns regarding the handling of children in the youth justice system. The most recent meeting took place on 20 April 2009, and I was encouraged by some of what he said about the improvements that are taking place or are planned. Some of those issues were raised during the debate.

It is important to recognise the risk factors and underlying causes that can often manifest in criminal or antisocial behaviour, to inform future consideration around support and intervention. Children with experience of the care system are often the most vulnerable in society and, as a result, many of those children go on to offend. I noted with interest that officials from the NIO are working closely with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the context of early intervention. That point was raised by a number of Members.

NIO officials and the Department of Health are also working together with the objective of ensuring that children from the care system only go into custody for the same offences for which children not from care would go into custody. I am sure that Members will be glad to hear that figures of admission from care to custody show that a marked decline took place from 2008 to 2009. The percentage of admissions is now at 19%, compared with 35% in 2008. That work must be developed and continued with appropriate resources.

The implementation of a number of individual proposals that are contained in the Care Matters strategy has begun already. The Criminal Justice Order 2008 provides for a care order to no longer be suspended on the making of a juvenile justice order. That ensures that social services has an ongoing duty to provide support and care for young people in those circumstances.

DHSSPS and NIO have also jointly funded an initiative that seeks to target young people who are on the edge of criminality. That joined-up approach is welcome, given the many diverse factors that can

contribute to young people's being engaged in the juvenile justice system.

I understand that a number of inspectorates, including the Education and Training Inspectorate, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, the Office of Social Services and Criminal Justice Inspection, are discussing taking forward a thematic piece of work to ensure co-operation and joined-up working on areas of common interest with input from the Equality Commission, NIHRC, NICCY and our officials in the children and young people's unit of OFMDFM. It is a welcome development that the agreed theme will be vulnerable and marginalised children and young people.

As some other Members have done, I recently visited Hydebank Wood young offenders centre and Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre to see, and speak directly to, the young people there. I did so as a result of concerns following the CJI report on prisons. We have met officials from the NIO and the Criminal Justice Inspection to discuss the number of juveniles who are being held in Hydebank Wood and aspects of the regime there that are highlighted in the report.

I am sure that the other Members who have visited both those establishments will have seen a clear difference in the way that the juvenile justice system works in Hydebank Wood, which is run by the Prison Service. There are also the beginnings, at least, of transfers and secondments from both establishments in an effort to affect the culture that exists in both areas. I am pleased that the criminal justice inspection programme for the next three years includes a key theme that focuses on the most effective way to deal with young people in the criminal justice system.

12.15 pm

As regards the concluding observations that the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child issued in October 2008, we are working closely with Executive colleagues and the NIO to progress those issues, which transect several Departments. The 10-year strategy for children and young people and associated action plans will be the main vehicles that will be used to work towards the realisation of children's rights and to progress the committee's concluding observations as far as possible. Our key challenge in delivering the strategy is to ensure that it delivers for all children and young people here. Therefore, we recognise the need to take appropriately targeted and resourced action to improve the lives of the most marginalised and vulnerable young people, especially those who are involved with the youth justice system.

The strategy has been endorsed fully by all Departments, the NIO and the Court Service, which is an active participant in its delivery. Representatives from key Departments and from both the NIO and the

Court Service sit on the strategy planning and review group, which was set up as one of the implementation groups for the strategy. Its role is to advise on and monitor the strategy action plans. The strategy planning and review group has now signed off the most recent three-year action plan, which will shortly go to the OFMDFM Committee for consideration prior to seeking Executive proposals.

It has been agreed with the group that the action plan will be a living document that is open to review and amendment. A key element of that review and development will be a focused piece of work on the concluding observations, with a view to developing additional actions around them. However, it is important to recognise that some of the issues that were outlined in the concluding observations are being addressed already. The exercise will focus on gaps that still exist.

We have analysed the UN committee's recommendations. Our officials will meet their counterparts in relevant Departments to discuss the recommendations and to identify priority action areas that are relevant to their responsibilities. We also intend to engage a wide range of children and young people to seek their views on the current actions and ask them to identify issues that are important to them. We have developed a young people's version of the concluding observations, and we will produce a young people's version of the action plan to facilitate that consultation.

That programme of engagement will culminate in a conference for young people that will take place in November 2009 — the twentieth anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child — and will help to inform the development of any additional actions that are required.

I must emphasise that although Jeffrey Donaldson and I, in our capacity as junior Ministers, will encourage ministerial colleagues to consider those views fully, we cannot make commitments to produce specific actions on behalf of other Ministers. Ultimately, it will be up to the relevant Departments to proceed with additional actions on the issues that are outlined in the UN committee's report. That also applies to the NIO in cases when concluding observations are relevant to reserved matters.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the junior Minister for giving way. I am interested in his assertion that neither the junior Ministers nor, indeed, OFMDFM will be able to, if you like, enforce, ask or insist that other Departments bring forward actions. That seems to go to the heart of OFMDFM's problems: as the Department with lead responsibility, it appears to have a carrot, but no stick.

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): The Member would probably shout at me if I said that OFMDFM should have that power over other Departments. Certainly, there are a few things that we might want to say to DHSSPS. OFMDFM has a cross-cutting ability to bring Departments together. Of course, there is also a ministerial subcommittee to deal specifically with that. In that subcommittee, there are subgroups, one of which deals with vulnerable children and is led by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Therefore, we have an ability to convince people that this is the way to go. I do not think that the Member would argue that we should be able to tell Ministers exactly what their Departments should do.

However, the reason for having a ministerial subcommittee is to ensure that there is a joined-up approach and collective responsibility for the matter. As many Members said during the debate, the issue is cross-departmental. At the beginning of the debate, Mr Kennedy said that we do not have any power. We do have power, and that power is to act as a ministerial subcommittee and put forward issues that can be dealt with. Ministers must be given the ability to deal with those matters in their Departments.

Mr B McCrea: I agree that the Executive have the power. However, they have the power to address many issues that are of concern to people. Will the junior Minister join with me to encourage everyone around the table to start tackling all the issues facing Northern Ireland?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): I join with the Member in calling on the Executive, who have worked hard to tackle those issues collectively, to continue in that mode.

Ultimately, it will be for the relevant Departments to decide whether to take additional action on the issues outlined in the UN committee's report. It is important to highlight that although the NIO is responsible for juvenile justice at the moment, the complex issues driving our young people to engage in criminal or antisocial behaviour cut across the remit of several Departments. At this stage, I am happy to provide feedback to Paul Goggins on the House's concerns about children in the juvenile justice system and the UN committee's recommendations. In fact, I will forward the Hansard report of the debate to him to ensure that he recognises the varying points of view.

I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in the debate. Some Members, including the Member who spoke previously, are passionate about the issue. That passion is shared by everyone. Despite Danny Kennedy's comments that the debate is not about political point scoring, Basil tried to score a few.

The debate on criminal consent will continue. At the moment, the NIO is responsible for that topic. Everyone supports the protection of society; and it is important

to say that, because one could get the impression after a debate such as this that some people were suggesting that we hang or shoot offenders whereas others did not want to put anyone in jail. That is not the issue: the issue is about protecting children and young people before they enter the system, and protecting them once they are in the system if there is no alternative to that for them. Indeed, a rehabilitation facility must be incorporated in order to prevent recidivism. We must tackle the reasons for imprisonment and recidivism as well as the issue of custody. It is important to deal with the whole matter.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): I have given way many times today.

Mr B McCrea: The junior Minister is very generous.

It is proper to consider how to prevent reoffending and how to deal with people who reoffend. Does the junior Minister accept that the victims are concerned that justice is not being seen to be done? We must decide how to tackle that issue, too.

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): I agree with the Member. Sometimes, it is a matter of emphasis and the passion with which we speak. The two concepts are not mutually exclusive. We have to deal with the fact that people, especially young people, go to jail for various reasons. Such issues must be tackled, and that is the collective responsibility of elected representatives and Departments. However, we also have a duty to protect young people when they are in institutions. David McNarry remarked earlier that I have experience of such institutions: never knock experience. I was in some of those institutions when I was very young. There is a lot to be learned. My trip to Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre was a good experience.

There is very good practice there. It is not the practice of all institutions, and there is a lot to be learned, but lessons are being learned, and it will take a joined-up approach to address the issue.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank all Members who contributed to the debate for doing so. I think that it was Danny Kennedy who said that Members were letting off steam. Sometimes that is no bad thing; although, in some cases, there can perhaps be too much of it.

Junior Minister Kelly, who is present in the Chamber — and I extend a fáilte, a welcome, to him — made a contribution that is significant to those of us who brought the motion to the House. The motion requests that the Executive look at the report of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, and we wanted to know what actions the Executive would take to address the concerns raised in it.

A number of Members raised issues, particularly about the age of criminal responsibility. Stephen Farry said that that issue was a red herring, and Dolores Kelly said that no 10-year-old child should be incarcerated and criminalised. Michelle McIlveen focused on ASBOs and on her party's view that, whether the age of criminal responsibility is 10, 14, 16 or 18, if one has done wrong, one should be accountable. I take the point that has been made by many Members; if one is the victim of some wrong, it is difficult to acknowledge that the perpetrator of that wrong is only 10 years old and that their circumstances are such that we should forgive, forgive, forgive.

The motion was obviously introduced by Sinn Féin —

Mr McNarry: Are you against it?

Mrs McGill: I am trying to make the point — and I hope that I am making it successfully — that Michelle McIlveen's point about the ASBOs and the age of responsibility was, in my view, well made. However, we are not agreeing that children should be incarcerated and criminalised at the age of 10, and Dolores Kelly touched on that issue. The debate on the age of criminal responsibility is one that should perhaps take place some other time.

My colleague Sue Ramsey introduced the debate, and the junior Minister outlined what the Executive can and cannot do. Sue made her point very forcibly in her remarks, and, in an intervention, even pointed out when one particular Member, in my humble view, was not addressing the motion. I thank Sue Ramsey for making that intervention and for bringing the debate back to the motion.

12.30 pm

Our motion does not ask that all the Byron Report's recommendations be accepted. It asks what the Executive can do. It is important to note that junior Minister Kelly told us what the Executive are doing. There is some debate about what the Executive can do and what powers they have. Policing and justice powers have not yet been devolved, but it is important that we know what we can do. A Member to my left made the point that every person around the Executive table should be encouraged to take part in the debate, and we subscribe to that. That is what the debate is about.

Sue Ramsey and others said that the issues of children from a care background are difficult, and Miss McIlveen talked about ASBOs. All those issues are addressed by the motion, and although we do not have devolved powers for policing and justice, it is important, as we did yesterday, to have an opportunity to let off steam or to articulate our points of view.

Ms S Ramsey: In my opening remarks, I mentioned the substantial number of young people who are involved in juvenile justice or care systems, but are not in education or employment. The Minister for Employment and Learning has entered the Chamber, so I will reiterate

that the purpose of the motion is to encourage collective responsibility. My colleague Carál Ní Chuilín mentioned the issue of health, and the Department for Employment and Learning also has an important role in ensuring that young people have the skills to make proper choices, not the wrong choices.

Mrs McGill: I thank Sue Ramsey for her intervention.

I will comment briefly on other Members' contributions. Danny Kennedy's remarks about what is happening to young people were valid. As a legislative Assembly, we have a responsibility to know what we can or cannot do, even at the risk of having repetitive debates that might not be competent. However, Carál Ní Chuilín and Stephen Farry made the point that the motion is competent. It is important to discuss the issues that Danny Kennedy raised in relation to young people.

Junior Minister Kelly talked about meeting Paul Goggins and the possibilities that arose from that meeting. He mentioned a conference on young people that will be held in November 2009, although I am not sure where it will be held. All the issues that have been mentioned are live, and it will be important to listen to what young people have to say.

Like other Members, Dawn Purvis visited Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre and was impressed by what happens there. She made the distinction, as did other Members, between Hydebank Wood, which is run by the Prison Service under the aegis of the NIO, and Woodlands, which is operated under a different system. It is my understanding that what is being done at Woodlands is the preferred model of provision. However, the point was made that Woodlands is under pressure and is struggling to accommodate the numbers of people who are in custody there.

Other contributions added to the debate, but not all were focused on the motion. However, my party welcomes the contributions that were made to the debate, and we look forward to hearing what the Executive will do, in whatever capacity, on this issue. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly, following the recent United Nations Committee on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC) Report, notes the concerns expressed regarding young people in the juvenile justice system; and calls on the Northern Ireland Office and the Executive to set out what actions they will be taking to address these concerns.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately on the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.35 pm.

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

2.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Special Educational Needs Review

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes 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 O'Dowd: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to agree to publishing, for consultation, the special educational needs and inclusion policy proposals tabled to it by the Minister of Education, thereby enabling the £25 million ring-fenced by the Minister of Education to be used to implement the changes that will benefit all children with special educational needs.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Unfortunately, I have to apologise on behalf of Michelle O'Neill, the co-signatory of the motion. She is on other Assembly business, but she fully supports the motion.

It is with regret that a motion that calls for a consultation document to be published by the Executive has to be debated today. We are not seeking the publication of a definitive policy document, nor are we seeking the ratification of legislation. Rather, we want the special educational needs and inclusion review to be published by the Executive and put out to the people for a three-month consultation period.

At this stage in the history of the special educational needs review, we should be talking about how we can spend the £25 million that has been set aside in the Department of Education's budget for special educational needs and inclusion. We are months, if not one year, behind in delivering on the review's proposals for the specialist schools and the children and families who are involved in this matter.

Why are we behind? There is always a delay with bureaucracy. It is almost expected, if not accounted for, in the provision of any document. However, I understand from media reports that the document in question went before the Executive in July 2008 for commentary. It was then to return to the Executive for further ratifications, and that is when it hit a snag, according

to those media reports. The snag appears to relate to the DUP's definition of special educational needs. That is despite the fact that the review had input from dozens of professionals from the field of special educational needs and inclusion.

The review itself was not implemented by the current Minister of Education, but by the British direct rule Minister Maria Eagle. In setting it out, she said:

"It is essential that we have the correct framework to meet the needs of children with special needs. This review will ensure that we deliver the most appropriate services to these children in the best way and at the best time, so they gain the maximum benefit.

We need a more timely and less bureaucratic means of identification and assessment to ensure we have appropriate provision, raising educational attainment for our children and young people with special needs whilst at the same time, providing equality of access and provision".

She said that such equality of access and provision should be applied across the North.

That is the crux of the issue, because a postcode lottery about what sort of specialist educational support a child may or may not receive exists across the five education and library board areas. No two systems are the same across the boards. The review was about ensuring that we had equality and an equality-proofed system that delivered to all children across the board areas.

The experts in the field published the report, which was believed at that stage to be non-contentious. It went before the Executive because of its cross-departmental nature. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety had its role to play in the review. It is my firm understanding that the Health Minister and his Department are satisfied — indeed, more than content — with the review as it stands. They are more than happy to allow it to go out for consultation. It is also my understanding that several Ministers across the Executive have also said that they are happy with the review, including some of the DUP Ministers. However, somewhere, somehow, the review hit a snag, because of what I have referred to as the fundamentalist wing of the DUP.

It is fundamentalist in a number of ways, because it is not up to me or any other politician to decide which children have special educational needs. The experts decided that definition in the review and set the criteria. Over the past while, I have read DUP statements claiming that my party and the Sinn Féin Education Minister set the criteria and defined special needs. Clearly, we did not; the experts who wrote the report set the criteria. The definition of special educational needs and inclusion is included in existing legislation that did not come through this House.

The DUP is now telling us that it will not accept the inclusion of children from the Travelling community in the definition of children with special educational

needs. I believe that that is racist. I am yet to hear an explanation from the DUP of why it will not include children from the Travelling community in that definition. The DUP also tells us that it will not include the children of single mothers, although it will not provide an explanation. I believe that that is because of the fundamentalist religious views of its members. To the DUP, young single mothers are not equal to everyone else in society, so it will not observe them as equal. The DUP also tells us that it will not accept the inclusion of children from care homes. From somewhere, although not an educationalist document, the DUP has decided on a narrow and exclusive definition of special educational needs.

I am more than happy to argue with DUP Members all day. However, the disappointing aspect of the continuing wrangle is that the £25 million that the Executive set aside to pump into the system remains idle. Some recent statements by the DUP have led me to worry that people have their eyes on that money and are wondering how else it could be spent. In the current economic difficulties, £25 million sitting idle is helpful to no one. However, instead of the party opposite resolving to get the problem solved, allowing the review to go out to consultation and allowing the public, families and children to respond, it has dug its heels in and refused to allow the review to go on the Executive agenda.

In his capacity as DUP spokesperson for education, the Chairperson of the Education Committee told that Committee a fortnight ago that he could confirm that the DUP was not blocking the review of special educational needs from going on the Executive agenda. However, at the subsequent Executive meeting, the review was not on the agenda. Although assumptions are sometimes dangerous, I assume that Sinn Féin did not block the review from appearing on the agenda, and I have not heard any rumours that either the Ulster Unionist Party or the SDLP blocked it. It must have been blocked somewhere.

Today's debate will not bring a conclusion to the ongoing dispute. However, it will, I hope, provide clarity on why the Executive, several months after seeing the first copy of the policy document, have not published it for consultation. The words of a spokesperson for the Royal National Institute of Blind People sum up the situation:

"Only when the politicians allow us to see these proposals shall we be able to have a full and informed debate on the future of special educational needs provision in Northern Ireland."

All we are asking is that the review document be published so that the consultation process and the political process can take place. Once that happens, we can bring discussion on the issue to an end. The £25 million that the system requires is long overdue. Educationalists and health experts must be allowed to

define special educational needs and inclusion, instead of us politicians with our sometimes narrow focus, either political or religious. Allow the experts in the field to decide, and move on.

Miss McIlveen: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "Executive" and insert

"to publish, for consultation, proposals to improve and modernise services for children with special educational needs including the statementing process; notes that spending on special needs has increased by £53 million in two years and that the increase year on year in the number of young people confirmed with special needs will quickly absorb additional funding; supports the existing definition of special education needs; and affirms that the focus of Executive Ministers in these challenging economic times should be on assisting those children with the most severe learning difficulties rather than seeking to broaden the definition to incorporate social factors."

There has been much haranguing across the Chamber in recent months about special educational needs, so I am glad that it can be debated. We have been waiting for far too long for it to be aired.

The provision of special educational needs has been discussed on a number of occasions, and many Members have been waiting for the outcome of the review. We know that the matter has been awaiting approval for some time, and I welcome the opportunity that the mover of the motion has given us to discuss it in the Chamber.

I do not support the motion, because I am not in favour of all the Minister's policy proposals. It is outrageous for the Member opposite to suggest that the DUP is looking to channel the money from SEN into another area. This is clearly an issue about money that was promised to special educational needs. Unfortunately, we have a Minister of Education who is attempting to put her hand in the cookie jar of children who have special educational needs and to reallocate those funds to a wider group.

For Members' information, when Maria Eagle announced the review in 2006, she said that it would focus on a number of themes:

"the arrangements for the identification and assessment of SEN; the nature, quality, extent of provision and support relating to assessed needs for children with SEN; SEN information and advice, disputes and appeals arrangements; early intervention/pre school SEN assessment and provision; capacity building for teachers, Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs), adult assistance; the role of special schools in providing support and advice to mainstream schools; and the role and expertise within Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS); inclusion of children and young people with SEN and/or disability in a mainstream setting including the impact of SENDO."

Social factors are not mentioned. That does not surprise me, and it should not surprise other Members. I am sure that most of us agree that those who have special educational needs are in a special category and deserve specific attention. Members may also agree that it is wrong to categorise a child who has recently been

bereaved with one who has severe and complex learning needs and, possibly, a physical disability. That is not comparing like with like.

The Minister is attempting to broaden the definition of special educational needs, which is to be renamed “additional needs”, and incorporate the following categories: children for whom English is not a first language; looked-after children; school-age mothers; young carers; Travellers; victims of bullying; and those who have suffered a bereavement. Although I recognise that children who fall under those headings encounter certain barriers to learning, it is wholly inappropriate to stack them in the same category as those who have severe learning difficulties.

The title of the review may contain the word “inclusion”, but that clearly refers to the inclusion of those who have special educational needs and/or a disability. Section 5 of the ‘Supplement to the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs’ states:

“This Section of the Supplement primarily focuses on the inclusion of children with SEN and not inclusion in its wider definition. Inclusion is a process by which schools, Boards and others develop their cultures, policies and practices to include pupils.”

However, the Minister seems to believe that “inclusion” means that she can siphon off money to other areas. The DUP feels that the issue of special educational needs is so important that we cannot let that happen.

All the groups for which Sinn Féin is holding out already receive dedicated sums annually. Indeed, many are protected in legislation. According to the Department of Education, in 2008-09, £6.5 million was allocated to support newcomer pupils, a category into which those whose first language is not English would fall. I also understand that £1.1 million was allocated to support Traveller children and £569,000 was allocated to fund Barnardo’s regional programme of support for school-age mothers. Looked-after children had £345,000 allocated, and £1.99 million was allocated for professional counselling support for young people in post-primary schools. The DUP supports the sums that are being allocated to those groups. However, the point is that money has already been allocated to them.

We are concerned about the money that has been ring-fenced for the purposes for which it was intended. The number of young people determined as having special needs is increasing rapidly year on year. In two years, the amount of spend on special needs has grown by £53 million, and that trend will continue in the years ahead. Any extra resources for special needs will be gobbled up almost immediately.

2.15 pm

More than 13,000 children have statements of special educational needs, a figure that represents 4.1%

of our young people. Departmental figures indicate that 60,000 — 18.6% — of our children have special educational needs. However, dealing with the problems of children who are faced with those difficulties is beset by bureaucracy and delays, and there is a clear need for a structured and planned use of resources. The review was intended to address that, but it is deeply regrettable that matters have stalled as a result of the Minister’s inclusion of additional categories.

The DUP firmly believes that resources should be prioritised to benefit children with the most severe special needs. We urge the Minister to introduce proposals without further delay to improve and modernise services for children with special needs. The barriers that many children face are difficult enough without having the Minister play with definitions. It is quite simple: the Minister has ring-fenced money for a particular purpose, and it should be spent on that purpose. Muddying the waters by introducing social factors is of no assistance. Therefore, I call on the Minister to submit to the Executive, with a view to publishing for consultation, proposals to improve and modernise services for children with special educational needs, including the statementing process. In that way, children with special educational needs will start to experience the benefit of the devolved institutions.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht thábhachtach seo inniu.

I am pleased to participate in this important debate. The SDLP firmly believes that all children have a right to fair and equal access to the curriculum and to learning, and children with special educational needs, in particular, have a right to the support and back-up that they need to fulfil their potential through education. To the greatest possible extent, children with special educational needs should be educated in an inclusive manner in the mainstream system, which, with appropriate support and intervention, should fully meet their needs.

A sizeable amount of the education budget — £171 million — is being expended on special educational needs, and that represents around 10% of the overall education spend. That is a considerable amount by any measure, and we must all ensure that the people who matter — the children — gain the fullest possible benefit from that resource. When we hear of inconsistencies and delays in assessments and, in some instances, long waiting lists, we must ask whether the allocated resources are being utilised to the maximum benefit. If they are not, we need to take action to change that. What we need coming out of the review is a framework that delivers the maximum benefits for children, meets their needs without undue delay, and intervenes early and effectively in a manner that leads to improvement and enhancement of their educational

experience, resulting in their fulfilling their maximum potential.

There can be no one-size-fits-all solution to special educational needs. There can be a general overarching framework, yes, but children's needs must always remain at the core. That has not always been the case under the current system. For instance, in the wider spectrum of special educational needs, our system tends to overlook children with sensory impairment, particularly children who are blind or deaf.

The inspectorate has already commented on the need for a framework to assess the progress of deaf children. Access to the curriculum has also been an issue for blind and deaf children. The review must address those issues and, likewise, the lack of support and back-up available to children with special educational needs in the voluntary and community preschool sector. Those children must be afforded the same rights as their counterparts in statutory settings.

The same could be said about children with special educational needs in the Irish-medium sector. To date, those children have been poorly served by a system that has been slow to respond to their distinctive needs.

A newcomer policy was recently published, but it contains little mention of how the system will respond to newcomer children with special educational needs: for example, children who have speech and language difficulties, need psychological assessment or have any other special need. We must know how the system will meet their needs.

At present, gaps exist in the system, and the publication of a consultation document on the review would give everyone the opportunity to highlight the deficiencies. It would also provide the Department with the feedback it requires to address them. As was mentioned, the special educational needs of Traveller children and looked-after children must also be addressed.

My list of examples is not exhaustive, but it is clear from those that I cited that many children face barriers to learning in the current system. To date, the system has not been flexible enough to respond in such a way as to remove those barriers. The SDLP expects the outcome of the review to result in a system that is sufficiently flexible to respond to the needs of all children.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member please bring his remarks to a close?

Mr D Bradley: We expect children with special educational needs not only to progress through the system but to advance educationally and maximise their potential.

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

Mr D Bradley: Their progress should be monitored in such a way as to ensure that their needs are met at all stages.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must resume his seat.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr B McCrea: My understanding is that the draft policy proposals were presented to the Committee for Education on 23 May 2008, which is a year ago. I am deeply disappointed that we have not been able to make progress more quickly. My principal concern and that of my party is for the children who need help and support. A way must be found to end the impasse.

From listening to the proposers of the motion and the amendment, I understand that the particular problem appears to be the broadening of the definition of special needs. However, I read the draft policy proposals over a year ago, and there will be more fundamental issues to address than that. I am interested in hearing what the schools have to say about those draft proposals, because they fundamentally change the relationships involved.

The draft proposals place a great onus on schools and teachers to take responsibility for deciding what intervention is required and providing the necessary resources. That will concern some schools. I am concerned about the practicalities of that. Perhaps the Minister will address the issue of whether, even if we reach agreement quickly on moving forward, we can meet the time frame that we have set for ourselves. There is much work to be done and a great deal of training to be organised, and considerable reassurance is required.

The motion refers to £25 million. Considerable sums of money have already been allocated, but they come to schools via the education and library boards. If and when the ESA is established, the money or moneys would, it is suggested, be transferred directly to the schools. I am concerned that the £25 million over which we are fighting will be lost in red tape and bureaucracy and that it will not reach its intended recipients.

With all those factors in mind, I urge the two protagonists in this dispute — Sinn Féin and the DUP — to find a way to resolve the issue to their mutual satisfaction so that the Assembly and the Executive can move forward together and look after the —

Mr O'Dowd: The Member called for what he called the "protagonists" to move forward. Would sending out what is a consultation document to the sector and to the public requesting feedback on its content not be a better way to referee this dispute? It must be

remembered that experts in the field, not Minister Ruane, drew up that document.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will be allowed an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr B McCrea: I note, as the Member said, that different stakeholders drew up the paper. I agree that the sooner that we get it out to consultation, the better. However, I recognise that some, not insurmountable, points of principle are involved that people could discuss. It must be possible to do something to attain some sort of a workable solution for the relatively small number of groups that has been holed out. The most important thing is that we must manage by agreement — by consensus. I am trying to provide a well-measured approach and to say that the Minister would have our collective support for a solution that looks after those who are in most educational need.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I will, if the Member promises to be quick.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that this issue and others are caught up in a game of ping-pong at the Executive between Sinn Féin and the DUP and that the real losers in that game are children with special needs?

Mr B McCrea: I was trying not to use that language, but that is my sentiment. There are real losers out there, red tape is in the way, and our schoolteachers face a problem getting adequate support for pupils that they have to support already anyway. Therefore, I agree that we must find a way forward.

In relation to how Ulster Unionist Members will vote, we are here with an open mind, willing to be convinced by the argument. We urge the Minister and those who tabled the motion and the amendment to find a solution that sends a clear signal to Northern Ireland that the most important people are children with special needs. We must find a way to look after them.

Ms Lo: I concur with Basil McCrea. We in the Alliance Party are disappointed that the review is stuck in the Executive like so many other major policies that have been held up because the two main parties cannot reach a collective decision for the good of the whole community.

It is shameful that there is a budget to implement the recommendations, yet, months after their scheduled publication, we are still arguing about them. We must bear in mind that the delay in publishing the review is unhelpful to our children's development and detrimental to their progress. Like other Members, I urge the two major parties to agree on the publication of the consultation document so that we and the public can debate the matter and make a decision on it.

After speaking to representatives of some integrated schools and to educational psychologists, I know that it is generally accepted that the (SENDO) is very positive. The Order has strengthened the rights of children with special educational needs to be educated in mainstream schools, thereby giving parents much more choice in selecting schools for their children.

I think that 67·6% of all statemented pupils are now in ordinary schools, which is what the majority of parents want. However, people are frustrated about various aspects of the current arrangements. They will certainly very much welcome the review.

2.30 pm

There are plenty of inconsistencies between boards, and there are no standard procedures for referrals or assessments. The criteria for any special-needs provision vary from board to board. Not every board has a SENDO co-ordinator. Parents are very confused about the different criteria that are given to them.

Last year, I examined two applications from children with special educational needs. The applications were transferred from board to board, and one was lost and the other was mislaid. As a result, the two children lost their places in two schools in Belfast. Lagan College was very concerned about referrals coming from different boards in bits and pieces. That is very difficult for schools. Children with special needs are classified as supernumerary, so they are in addition to the set enrolment numbers for schools. Teachers and schools have to consider class sizes and health and safety issues when they take in extra pupils.

There are also delays in assessments and provision. It takes a long time for children to reach stage 3 and get assessed by educational psychologists, of whom there are clearly not enough because the waiting list is very long. In April 2008, over 2,000 children were on the waiting list. I believe that children now have to wait for a year or more before they are assessed. Accessing the provisions is also a very lengthy process. Very often, schools and parents themselves have to fight for those resources.

The year-on-year increase in the number of statements means that a growing number of children with special needs are in mainstream schools. The schools are expected to do so much, but they do not receive the training, the support or the resources that they need to help the children. It is important that children get the appropriate support as early as possible so that the problem is addressed. That way, they will not fall further behind and will achieve their full potential. Time and resources for schools to do preventative work is also very important. If schools do not receive enough training in special educational needs, teachers find it very difficult to support the children.

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

Ms Lo: Currently, the strategy is very reactive. I would like to see a more strategic use of limited resources.

Mr Storey: It is with a great degree of sadness that we have had to come to this House today to discuss and debate this issue. I support the amendment. It is shameful that politics is clearly being played with an issue such as special educational needs.

Some months ago, I had the privilege of visiting Ceara Special School in Lurgan, which had recently been attacked by vandals. Anyone who has visited that type of school will know that we must ensure that we deliver for those children. We can all come to this House, and, one by one, we can all stand, wring our hands and say that it is all for the children. However, the buck stops with us in relation to the delivery of what will be put in place for those children.

When Mr O'Dowd, the proposer of the motion, rose to speak, he was somewhat perplexed about how we had come to be in this position.

I cannot understand why he should be concerned or perplexed because he knows the reason; there is a degree of disingenuousness on the part of Sinn Féin. Many of us are heavily criticised for coming into these institutions and for sitting in a Chamber with Sinn Féin, given its past. However, we made a political judgement that it was for the best of the people of Northern Ireland.

As I said in a debate earlier today, the public are saying, "a plague on all your houses." That is because of the expenses issue and the way in which democracy is being put through the mill at the moment. Far more important, people wish a plague on all our houses when we cannot agree to release a document for consultation, not about our expenses or how we cut the grass or some trivial issue, but about the most vulnerable children in our society.

Let us have some honesty. The DUP has not hidden its unhappiness that the consultation document includes children whose first language is not English, looked-after children, school-age mothers, young carers, Travellers, victims of bullying and those who have suffered bereavement. It is not our agenda to have a go at the Travelling community. For the Member opposite to link our position to our fundamentalist views — I assume that he was referring to me and to others — is absolute, pathetic nonsense. He has done himself a disservice by claiming that we are somehow racist and that because of my fundamentalist views I will block the release of a document for consultation.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: No; I will not give way.

I am sick, sore and tired of the party opposite telling us that it is all about listening, coming together and having consensus; however, when we raise genuine concerns and say that we would prefer that the document did not include those elements, we find that that party is less interested in listening. Those issues have already been dealt with; therefore, it is not that we have not given money to Travellers, as my colleague said, or that we are ignoring school-age mothers or those who have suffered bereavement. The Minister tells us that there will be a review of the common funding formula at some stage — probably *ad infinitum* — and we will look at how those issues can be addressed.

The challenge that I make to the Minister today — in fact, it is more than a challenge, it is a plea — is to get the document to the Executive, put it out for consultation, and then we will move forward on the issue. Stop playing politics, and, for the first time, Minister, please tell people the real reason why you want the document held: you want to make a scene about the issue so that you can be seen to have concern for children.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate and, as with previous debates today, I commend the Business Committee for selecting the motion. Unlike some Members, I welcome the Minister. We criticise Ministers when we need to, but the Ulster Unionists are keen to highlight the number of motions that their Health Minister has attended, and it is important that we recognise that the Education Minister has been in the Chamber for two motions today.

It is interesting that today's motions have all related to children and young people. Whether Members agree with them or not, it is useful that, probably for the first time in a long time, the issues that affect children and young people are starting to take centre stage in government and on the Assembly's agenda. Whatever the outcome of the debate, that needs to be recognised. I thank my colleagues John O'Dowd and Michelle O'Neill for bringing to the Floor of the House the motion calling on the Executive to agree to publish for consultation the special educational needs and inclusion policy proposals.

Unfortunately, Mervyn Storey is not in the Chamber, but I agree with him: it is shameful that people are playing politics with the issue. If he were in the Chamber, I would ask him why he will not support the policy proposals being published for consultation, as that will get us away from the accusation that people are playing politics. Perhaps the DUP Member who makes the winding-up speech on the amendment will answer that question. We need to know whether Mr Storey is saying that children in care, children who have suffered and those from the Travelling, Chinese and other communities do not, or will not, have special

needs. Earlier today, we debated the juvenile justice system, and Members must take on board the fact that there is an issue there about children with special educational needs.

The purpose of agreeing to publish the proposals for consultation is to enable everybody to have their say, be they political representatives, individuals, people from our communities, people from the education sector or the community and voluntary sector, or individuals who are directly or indirectly involved with children with special needs. Let the experts, for want of a better word, have their say. Members are not experts; we listen to experts from different sectors who come to us to tell us how things really are.

I agree with Basil McCrea that people with special educational needs are not going away. However, in response to what he said later in his contribution, the longer that the delay continues, the longer those children continue to suffer, and that is not right.

Mr B McCrea: I want to confirm and reiterate that point that I made. Regardless of what we do, there will be children with special educational needs. People are trying to manage the situation, and the sooner that we can find some way forward, the better it will be for all those children.

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

Ms S Ramsey: I completely agree with what the Member said. However, the longer that the delay continues, the more children will be affected.

I do not want to get caught up in the politicking of the issue. People who know me know that I do not get caught up in that; I take a common-sense approach to things. If we block the consultation, we will create a rod for our own backs. Let us publish the proposals for consultation; let the experts have their say. From that, we will move forward.

Mr Storey: There seems to be some confusion around the issue. Were children who do not have English as a first language, looked-after children and school-age mothers included in the original document? Or is it the case that they have been included by educational advisers or the Minister's adviser, who has a political hat? Will the Member clarify that for us? We do not want to be unjustly casting aspersions on a sector.

Ms S Ramsey: I have no difficulty giving way to a Member if his or her contribution adds to the debate. I will not answer Mr Storey's question; it is the Minister's job to answer it. Perhaps one of his colleagues may have informed him of this, but the Member was not in the Chamber when I asked whether he believed that particular groups of people do not have special educational needs. I believe that the groups of people

that he mentioned do have special educational needs, and that is an issue that we need to examine.

A number of Members have quoted different sources. In a press release this morning, the Commissioner for Children and Young People said that the review of special educational needs and inclusion is an essential development in providing appropriate support to children and young people who require help in their education.

She also said:

"I hope that today's Assembly debate will serve to remind all involved that while the discussions and arguments are batted back and forth children and young people are waiting for the support that this policy is designed to provide".

I am conscious of time, Mr Speaker. Other Members quoted direct rule Minister Maria Eagle. I will finish by quoting our local Minister. In a press release on 27 March 2009, she said:

"We need to provide education to children with special needs that is individual to them and will help them get the best from their school years ... It is important that children with special educational needs or disabilities can be educated together with other children and they all have the access to the same range of educational opportunities."

Members should note that she said "educated together", because we are talking about inclusion.

I do not see any difficulty with the motion. I support the motion and commend my colleagues for tabling it.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Members who tabled the motion. It deals with an issue that is vital for many vulnerable children and their families.

However, the Sinn Féin motion and DUP amendment are clear indications of the failure of the Executive lead that those two parties provide and their failure to work in partnership on an issue that will have a significant impact on the lives of some of the most vulnerable children and their families. This debate is a public display of the DUP and Sinn Féin's inability to work together to overcome problems that will affect thousands of vulnerable children.

2.45 pm

As an Assembly Member, I am debating an Executive paper that I have not read — none of us is supposed to have read it. No doubt the public are suggesting, rightly, that we are entering the realms of farce. Are the Executive now porous? Are they an extension of the entire DUP and Sinn Féin parties?

A measure of any society is how well it supports, encourages and facilitates children and people with special needs, and how it enables them to fulfil their potential and live satisfied lives. Although we accept that issues still need to be resolved on the way forward for special educational needs and, indeed, the definition of who should be considered to have those

needs, I understand that Ulster Unionist Party representatives were prepared to allow a redrafted paper to be issued for consultation in the interest of moving the process forward to ensure that young people with special educational needs would receive the education and care support that they require and deserve. That would have enabled the public to respond to the ideas in the consultation paper and, hopefully, their views to be taken on board.

We need to improve special educational needs provision in Northern Ireland. That means providing a more strategic vision across the education spectrum that is fully integrated with health and social care services. It is my understanding that the Minister of Education's paper is steering us in the direction of a more integrated strategy that would enable children with special educational needs to be further integrated into mainstream education among their peers.

I support that approach in general. However, I seek assurance that adequate long-term resources and training will be provided and that time will be made available to mainstream teachers and other staff to enable them to carry out their duties. It is not a matter of allocating one-off funding; there must be long-term support in that area. That planning has to happen, and I am interested in hearing the Minister's response to that point.

Furthermore, I would be interested to hear how the new proposals would integrate with the existing free school meals provision, which provide some support and a potential area for interaction with the proposed services.

The need for greater strategic vision has been highlighted by the case of the Middletown Centre for Autism, which has taken a new and controversial twist this week. That centre represents what can happen if flawed policy is implemented, if politics is placed above the needs of the children and if money is spent without the commitment of all the experts in the field.

That white elephant of a project has cost £6 million, which could have been used to help young people with autism and their families directly and much more productively. With that in mind, I respect what appear to be genuine concerns from DUP Members. However, I reiterate that this is not the correct platform for the debate. The issue must be resolved at the Executive. This debate is a disgraceful reflection of the way in which the two main parties in the Executive do business. More pertinently, it reflects the two main parties' inability to do any meaningful business and produce any legislation other than that agreed in some sort of carve-up and subsequently pushed through the Assembly with accelerated passage.

I am sure that numerous parents of children with special needs are listening intently to this debate, wondering what the outcome will be. The DUP and

Sinn Féin are letting young people and their families down, and Ministers should take that into consideration when the Executive next meet.

This issue will not be resolved here —

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

Mr Beggs: We need the Executive to take a decision, not a public spat between the Executive parties.

Mr Poots: It is always good to follow Mr Beggs, because his incoherent drivel makes the next Member to speak sound particularly good.

On the one hand, Mr Beggs tells us that the DUP is engaged in a cosy carve up and a sweet relationship with Sinn Féin; on the other hand, he says that we cannot get on with each other and that nothing is being done. He cannot have it both ways. Neither is true. We are engaged in a Government with four parties: sometimes we can come to arrangements and find agreement on moving things forward; at other times things take longer and involve hard bargaining before a consensus is achieved. That is how Government in Northern Ireland was set up. The Member's party had much to do with the establishment of that Government in the first instance, so he need not criticise the DUP, as it made significant improvements to the Belfast Agreement through the St Andrews Agreement.

It is important to deal with the issue of special educational needs. The Minister has put forward proposals, but I am worried about the motion, which states that we should allow:

"the Executive to agree to publishing, for consultation, the Special Educational Needs and Inclusion policy proposals tabled to it by the Minister of Education, thereby enabling the £25 million ring-fenced by the Minister of Education to be used to implement the changes that will benefit all children with special educational needs."

Is this another case of the Minister of Education threatening everybody else? She is saying that she is sitting on £25 million, which is ring-fenced, but that no one with special educational needs will be able to utilise it unless she can publish her paper for the public to see. Many children with special educational needs could use that money now, and the Minister has no reason not to utilise it. She may be able to clarify the matter and tell us that the money is being utilised and will continue to be utilised. The Sinn Féin motion has been drafted in such a way that it would appear that there is an implicit threat that the money for those with special educational needs will not be forthcoming until the Minister gets her way.

I have serious concerns about diluting the definition of special educational needs. I could have a little sympathy for the Minister — believe it or not — in that she inherited the problem. Children with special

educational needs were not treated fairly or appropriately before she took office. We saw that when the South Eastern Education and Library Board was stood down because it was given insufficient funding to meet the circumstances of children with special educational needs and commissioners were brought in to cut services. Unfortunately, the Minister, who has been in office for two years, has kept the commissioners and has not brought the board back, which would have had a degree of public accountability. She has endorsed what was done by the direct rule Minister, who brought in commissioners to make cuts for children with special educational needs.

We do not have adequate funding for children with special educational needs. Additional funding has been given to the Minister to deal with the issue, and now the Minister wants to broaden the scope.

Ms Ramsey seems to think that children from certain categories will automatically have special educational needs. That was a very disparaging comment for Ms Ramsey to make about groups that have been identified —

Ms S Ramsey: The Member has misquoted me. In replying to Mr Storey, I asked him whether he was saying that people who are in care — those who were referred to earlier and who might have special educational needs — are not in need. I have no doubt that children from some of those communities and backgrounds have a very high educational attainment, and that has been proven. I was saying that there is a focus on people who have need; let us put the money and the resources where it is needed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Poots: I was hoping that Ms Ramsey would intervene, as she has strengthened my case. Anyone who falls into those groups is entitled already to seek to have those children statemented and to go down the same routes as everyone else and identify a special educational need.

There is nothing in the current assessment process that would preclude any of those children from being identified as having special educational needs. Ms Ramsey wants a broad-brush approach applied, so that everyone in that group would be classified as having special educational needs. I find that grossly insulting and wholly inappropriate. Sinn Féin should withdraw that notion very quickly.

We need the resources made available to the young people with special educational needs. We do not need to dilute the process. Those who are most in need should receive. I will wholly resist any attempt to dilute or take away resources from those who need them most.

Mrs M Bradley: Children with special educational needs, however slight or severe, all need and deserve appropriate attention. They have a right to an education that meets their needs, and it is not good enough to hold them to ransom through political ball games that are fictitious to say the least. We have been here before with a similar motion pertaining to the Barnett consequential. At that time, we asked for money to be ring-fenced to meet the needs of disabled children; here we are again, begging for the approval of funds for children with special educational needs.

Children with special needs are always in need of help. Their teachers are frustrated by the lack of classroom assistants, and it is not so long ago that the classroom assistants debacle threatened to shut down our schools. Parents are at their wits' end: having children assessed and statemented is like mining for gold. Those parents face unnecessary delays, as they may have to navigate their way through a difficult system.

I have no doubt that many Members' offices are as busy as my own, with parents complaining that they cannot get the help that they need for their children, inside and outside the educational system. In some cases, children cannot attend school because appropriate support and help is not available. That is not acceptable. The school census of 2007-08 shows that 18% of schoolchildren have special educational needs. Therefore, we need a comprehensive policy framework to guide the provision of education for those children. Parents and teachers alike are crying out for help, and they deserve better than they get at present.

There is a clear and defiant atmosphere among educationalists. They are dealing with the fallout of transfer 2010 and all the difficulties that that will bring. They cannot, and should not be expected to, take on the burden of non-supply of the appropriate special-needs tools and assistance that they need to make life special for the children and equip them to live as full a life as possible within their individual capabilities.

There is also the issue of equality. Equality quietly educates these children's classmates in how to treat and support them, and encourages them to demand the same respect that others, who have no such needs, demand without apology and expect without thought.

The Executive constantly remind us of the cross-cutting themes of a shared and better future for all, through equality, fairness and inclusion. Public service agreement 10 is entitled "Helping our children and young people to achieve through education" and its third objective is to:

"Provide more effective interventions to support children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Additional Educational Needs (AEN)".

Its target is to:

"Introduce greater consistency and better value for money in the delivery of Special Educational Needs services by 2010-11".

We are now almost through 2009, and I am sorry to say that there is little hope of realising those objectives and targets.

I ask the Executive to be more open-minded in their dealings with Ministers and their proposals. The review of special educational needs and inclusion is long overdue, and must be published for consultation without delay so that all children with special needs can access the most appropriate form of education. There is not a parent or educationalist who will give Members any respect for what they are doing. We should not have to be standing here, negotiating something like this for these children.

I support the motion.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mr Storey said he visited Ceara School: so did I, and I, too, spoke with the principal. That was well over a year ago, and I have met him on many occasions since.

The principal is a member of the steering group that was established to oversee the review of special educational needs and inclusion. During my first visit to the school, he said to me that the review is one of the most important to have taken place and that I should bring it forward quickly.

3.00 pm

I will answer the question about the origin of the review. The original document covered a review of all children with special educational needs, including Traveller children and newcomer children, because the legislative definition of special educational needs includes all those children. The steering group advised that the proposed overarching framework should take account of the needs of all children who experience barriers to learning. The original document was produced before I became the Minister of Education and refers to the groups of children that face barriers to learning. That does not mean that I not believe that those groups should be included; of course they should. However, we should not use the narrow definition that some people have used.

My officials have been working very hard on the review. They have also been working hard with officials from other Departments, such as the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Employment and Learning, to deal with significant, cross-cutting issues. I know that Michael McGimpsey and Reg Empey are very interested in addressing the transitions and supporting children with special educational needs.

Some Members commented on the Middletown Centre for Autism. I will not go into a big debate about

that now. The time and place for that debate is tomorrow at the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format, which is actually taking place in Middletown. Given some Members' comments, I want to praise the centre for the important work that it has already done. More than 700 health and education professionals have been trained there. That is just one of the many areas of work that the centre does. Therefore, before people make criticisms, they should take into account the work of those professionals.

Children with special educational needs were the key focus of the review of special educational needs and inclusion. Part of the review's remit, and its terms of reference, was to recognise the increasing diversity of need in schools. During the policy development stage of the review, significant pre-consultation was carried out with education and health and social care professionals, the statutory and voluntary sectors, and parents, children and young people. That pre-consultation activity helped to develop and shape the policy proposals that I forwarded to my Executive colleagues in July 2008. In case Members are not listening, I will repeat that: I forwarded the policy proposals in July 2008.

Worldwide academic research recognises consistently that early identification and implementation of appropriate support interventions enables children to catch up with their classmates and provides support for those who need it on a continuing basis. It also means that help is available as early as possible, thereby reducing the risk of long-term underachievement and disaffection. I plan to establish a robust and accountable framework that identifies children's needs as early as possible and provides support for them.

Many Members spoke about parents' concerns today. Many of the parents to whom the review team spoke during the development stage of the proposals expressed concern at the fact that their children had to go through a formal assessment process before they could even begin to receive the support that they needed and that their child had to be seen to be noticeably failing before that formal assessment even commenced.

That predicament is compounded further by the fact that until the current bureaucratic process has run its course and a label has been assigned to a child, many schools delay in providing any form of support programme. That is particularly worrying given that earlier intervention may either prevent a child from falling even further behind or render continuation of the formal statementing process unnecessary.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No, I will not.

Many children are already being supported in their learning. However, we need to ensure that well-developed systems are in place and that those are sustained by an appropriately skilled workforce that operates at different levels to ensure that no child falls through the net and that their learning needs are not left undiscovered until it is too late. Therefore, the proposals emphasise the role of schools, particularly teachers, to be more aware of the increasing diversity of need and ability in classes and to respond as quickly as possible before the child begins to experience difficulties that may become more deeply entrenched as time is allowed to slip by.

Tá sé ríthábhachtach mar sin go dtugtar na scileanna, an fhéin-mhuinín agus an tacaíocht do phríomhoidí, do mhúinteoirí agus do bhaill foirne eile i scoileanna le freastal ar na dúshláin a thugann an éagsúlacht riachtanas dóibh ina ranganna gach aon lá.

Therefore, it is vital that school principals, teachers, classroom assistants and other staff in schools are given the confidence, support and training to meet the challenges that are presented by the diversity of need that they experience in their classrooms. In recognition of that fact, I secured an extra £25 million through the 2007 Budget in addition to the current annual amount that is spent on SEN. That funding will be used to commence capacity building programmes in educational settings to enhance the current provision to ensure that the education system can provide an effective continuum of support for a continuum of need.

Those programmes will build on the existing expertise of teachers and facilitate the sharing of advice and experience among the special school sector, the mainstream school sector and other professionals. It is anticipated that that increased expertise will reduce the current over-reliance on external assessment and assistance to support children who face barriers to learning and that it will diminish the need for the acquisition of a statement and the associated delay, costs and bureaucracy. Most importantly, it will provide children with the support that they need when they need it.

One Member said that we do not have enough educational psychologists, which is the wrong way to view the issue. Consideration must be given to whether educational psychologists are being used in the correct way, and I argue that they are not.

The Executive have already set a number of challenging targets that aim to reduce the gap in expertise. The proposed inclusive framework in the consultation document complements and supports the anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy, which is part of the Executive's programme.

Raising standards for all children and young people is at the heart of every departmental proposal and

policy. The SEN and inclusion review policy proposals, therefore, sit firmly in tandem with the literacy and numeracy strategies and are an integral part of the Department's school improvement programme, 'Every School a Good School', and the raising standards agenda. The policy proposals advocate a concept of additional educational needs that recognises the challenges and overlapping barriers that already exist for many children.

It appears that some of those who have had sight of the policy proposals have not fully understood the concept of additional educational needs, so I shall take a few moments to clarify what I mean when I use that phrase. That change in educational terminology is an indication of the extent to which the spectrum of support needs has widened over the years. In some cases, support needs are mild and temporary, and they may arise from the context in which the child is located: for example, school, family or community. At the other end of the spectrum, the child or young person's impairments may be multiple and permanent.

The concept of additional educational needs is not intended to be an extension or redefinition of special educational needs. The definition of special educational needs is set out in legislation, and I have no intention of changing that. I shall repeat that: the definition of special educational needs is set out in legislation, and I have no intention of changing that. The Members opposite know that, so before they start giving out about parties playing politics, they should examine their consciences.

Factors such as unemployment, poverty, domestic violence, sexual violence and abuse, and racism often feature heavily in the background of children who experience difficulties in school and beyond.

As my colleague Sue Ramsey explained much more articulately than I will, it is not about labelling children or assuming that certain circumstances will always give rise to similar difficulties in learning but about developing an holistic approach in education that identifies the educational needs of all children when they occur, and supporting those needs.

The emphasis is very much on preventative intervention. The Assembly has heard much from the Members who sit on the Benches opposite about preventative intervention. That is what the matter is all about. Through earlier identification and tackling the difficulties, whether those be in the short or long term, that the wider group faces, it is proposed that fewer children will have to progress down the statementing route before their needs are met.

I must also stress that the three advisory groups, whose membership consisted of teachers and professionals drawn from the education and health fields, agreed on the use of the term "barriers to

learning". It is the terminology that is used in the rest of Ireland, in England, Scotland and Wales, in Scandinavia, and throughout the world where progressive and thinking people understand the importance of reducing barriers to achievement.

The number of children formally identified with special educational needs continues to grow steadily. It equates to 14.5% of the school population in 2003 and to 18.6% in 2008. I note that the amendment proposes that Ministers' focus should be limited to assisting children who have the most severe learning difficulties. Please, almost 2,000 children are recorded as having severe learning difficulties, which represents only 3% of more than 60,000 children who have been identified as having some form of special educational need.

Does the proposer of the amendment seriously suggest that one group of children is more important than another? It is not helpful to raise the concerns of parents whose children do not fall into the severe-learning-difficulty category that their child or their child's school may lose out in a funding war. I am committed to improving outcomes for all children, including the 60,000 children who have some form of special educational need and the 4.1% of children who have SEN statements.

It must be ensured that all available funding — £192 million and the additional £53 million, to which the amendment refers, that was secured through the 2004 spending review and utilised between 2005 and 2008 — is used to improve outcomes for all children with special educational needs.

I take the opportunity to respond to comments that the current SEN budget will be stretched to accommodate and support children who are not on the SEN register. Many children who are already identified as having special educational needs face additional barriers to learning: the two are not mutually exclusive.

In order to facilitate more progressive thinking, I distributed the equality impact assessment of those policy proposals to my ministerial colleagues in February 2009 to help to inform their understanding of the consultation document. The equality impact assessment demonstrates the range of special educational needs and additional needs, which can overlap, that is presented in schools.

There is no intention to divert money that supports children who have special educational needs in order to support the other additional-needs groups. The additional-needs groups attract their own levels of funding, which Members have discussed. Some 70% of children who have statements of special educational need now attend mainstream schools. As I said, my officials have worked closely with their colleagues in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Both Departments are committed to improving

interventions and outcomes for all children and young people.

I wrote to my ministerial colleagues in July 2008. In November, I issued a further Executive memo that included amendments to reflect Ministers' comments. That delay in launching the consultation has already raised concerns about the possible loss of the £25 million that has been mentioned.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to bring her remarks to a close.

The Minister of Education: Although the shift in timescales means that I may not be able to commence implementation of the full package of proposals in 2010 — for example, those that require changes to legislation — I plan to use that money for its intended purpose.

Of course, I will review on an ongoing basis any financial implications that arise from further slippage. I will not tolerate children with special needs being disadvantaged in any way by a lack of progressive thinking. Go raibh míle maith agat.

3.15 pm

Mr McCausland: The debate began poorly when John O'Dowd attacked some members of the Democratic Unionist Party. His comments could at least be regarded as sectarian and were extremely offensive. *[Interruption.]*

Sometimes people who accuse others of sectarianism are themselves the most guilty of sectarianism. I suggest that he examine his own conscience in that regard.

Michelle McIlveen's response to Mr O'Dowd's comments was extremely significant, and she pointed out the key issue, which, for us, is that resources would be spread across other sectors rather than concentrated specifically on special educational needs. That broadening of the definition creates difficulties. Other children may have distinctive and particular needs and varying degrees of need. However, those degrees of need may be more social than educational, and, in practice, if the Minister pursues her approach, she will, in effect, rob the most vulnerable children in our society.

As Michelle McIlveen said, we acknowledge the current system's shortcomings, the delays in assessment and the problems with the statementing process, and recognise the need for review. Those of us who have served on education and library boards and who have worked with children in those sectors are well aware of the need for review, but it is important to get it right.

Dominic Bradley said that an efficient and effective system is required to meet children's needs. One could not disagree with that assertion in any way. Other Members expressed their disappointment at the delays, and Anna Lo outlined a specific example. Those of us

who have worked in that field for many years are aware of the issues involved. Only this morning, I dealt with a constituency case on special educational needs. There is recognition across the Chamber about that matter. Anna Lo also commented on the increasing numbers of children with special educational needs. Therefore, it is important to address the issue properly and to ensure that any policy review achieves the right outcome.

Mervyn Storey spoke of his sadness at the current situation and said that he was concerned about the definition of special educational needs. He emphasised that John O'Dowd's approach had done a disservice to his argument. Moreover, he said that the concentration and emphasis must be on children with special educational needs, who are the most vulnerable in our society.

Roy Beggs also used the word "vulnerable", which was used repeatedly during the debate. He referred to the example of Middletown and talked about a flawed policy. That shows the importance of creating the right policy, and that is why this debate and other discussions on the spread of resources have taken place.

Edwin Poots responded to Roy Beggs and reminded him of the reality of a coalition system of Government that was initially negotiated by his own party.

The issue of the £25 million was mentioned, and the Minister almost seems to be saying that unless we do what she says, the money will be lost. There is no reason why the money cannot be spent now, because the money is available and the need exists. Therefore, it is not a question of money being lost; the money could be spent. The issue is about diluting the definition. Our experience of education and library boards shows that there is a shortfall in funding for special educational needs across the boards. Therefore, if the money is available, it should immediately be put into the service.

Mention was made of the question of inclusion and additional categories. No one in the additional categories is excluded, and those with special educational needs are already included. While listening to the Minister, it seemed that the issue is one of confusion and a lack of clarity, because two elements have been combined: special educational needs and inclusion. The Minister pointed out that many children with special educational needs have additional needs; one could not disagree with that assertion.

However, not all children with additional needs have special educational needs. That confusion must be addressed; the need for clarity is fundamental to the debate. Special educational needs and additional educational needs are not the same. We need to ensure that children with special educational needs are not in any way deprived of resources by a broadening of the policy.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend my colleagues John O'Dowd and Michelle O'Neill for tabling the motion. At times, the

debate digressed from the motion, so I will concentrate on what Members said and on the motion itself.

John O'Dowd said that the review of special educational needs has hit a snag at Executive level because of the DUP's interpretation of special educational needs. He made the argument that the equality of access that the policy proposals would provide for children who have special educational needs is the core issue of the debate. The review is cross-departmental, and several Ministers have already supported its findings. We are at pains to see why there is such a hold up on something that is so important.

On the definition of special needs, some Members said today that children from the Travelling community, the children of young single mothers and children who come from care homes and difficult backgrounds should not be included in the review. It is shameful if people believe that. Nelson McCausland said that some children do not have those special educational needs. Is he seriously saying that a child who has been bereaved of a parent, for instance, does not have special educational needs at that stage in their life?

Mr McCausland: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: No, I will not give way, because I have only 10 minutes. The Member's party did not give way much during the debate.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The Member never gives way.

Ms J McCann: I do.

At the core of the debate is the narrow definition of special educational needs. John O'Dowd said that the public should be allowed to decide. The policy proposals should be put out for consultation. Why are the Members frightened of that? The people whom the issue concerns should be allowed to make the decision; it should not be held up any longer than has already been the case.

In moving the amendment, Michelle McIlveen said that the definition of special educational needs should not include particular groups. The review was carried out by specialists in the field of educational health, not by Sinn Féin or the Minister of Education, and it is not aimed at furthering the political agenda of Sinn Féin. That is an important point.

Dominic Bradley referred to the delays in assessments and the need for a framework that will lead to improvements for children, because all children should realise their potential. He mentioned the lack of support in the voluntary and community preschool sector, which was also an important point. He went on to call for the publication of the consultation document.

Basil McCrea expressed concern at the delay in progress. That concern was expressed by quite a number

of Members, who felt that the policy proposals should be put to the people.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: No, I will not give way, because I want to make a number of points. I will give way if I have time at the end.

Anna Lo echoed the comments of Basil McCrea that the review has been held up for too long, and she expressed concern that the delay is having an impact on children who have special educational needs. The waiting lists for assessment are still very lengthy.

Mervyn Storey played the political card and asserted that Sinn Féin was playing politics on an important issue. I repeat that experts in the field, not Sinn Féin, conducted the review. It became very clear during the debate that the DUP is playing politics and is holding things up. The review must go out for consultation.

Sue Ramsey and Roy Beggs outlined the need for a strategic vision that adopts a holistic approach across the sector and that includes health and social care services.

Edwin Poots returned to the definition of special educational needs. He said that Sue Ramsey had been disingenuous when she mentioned the groups of people who have such needs. However, I will point out that 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 qualifications; and as little as 23% of pupils from the most deprived backgrounds achieve five or more GCSEs, in contrast to 64% of pupils across the North of Ireland. It is clear that children from those backgrounds need extra help and support.

Mary Bradley said that delays and bureaucracy are affecting children and their families, and she called for the review to go out to consultation as soon as possible.

In her response, the Minister said that a pre-consultation exercise involving education and health and social care professionals had taken place before the review was brought to the Executive. That exercise helped to develop the proposals that had been brought forward. Early intervention is essential in preventing children from falling further behind. The review must be brought forward, because, as the Minister said, school principals, teachers and other school staff must be given the support and confidence that they need. She went on to say that £25 million had been secured in addition to the current annual amount that is being spent on special educational needs.

The Minister had to repeat herself several times, but I will say it again, in case anyone is unclear: the definition of special needs is set out in legislation, and the Minister has no intention whatever of changing it. That is an important point to make. If that is what is

holding things up, the definition is there, and the Minister explained it again today.

It is to be hoped that the debate will highlight the need for the review of special educational needs to be brought forward —

Mr McCausland: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: No. I am trying to finish, and Dominic Bradley will be first to speak if I do give way.

The review of special educational needs must be brought forward and put out for consultation. It is shameful that anyone in the Assembly or in the Executive should hold up that review. We must look after those children and their families. It is not up to us; let the people decide what they think of that consultation document.

I will give way to Dominic Bradley.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. She said rightly that there is a need to put the review document out for consultation, because it is far behind schedule already. This morning, I heard the Children's Commissioner call for a short consultation period. Does the Member agree that it would be foolish to issue the consultation document on the verge of the beginning of the school holidays, at a time when teachers will not have the opportunity to engage properly with the consultation? This is an important consultation, because it is concerned with the most vulnerable children in society. It is important that all the relevant professionals have ample opportunity to consider it and to respond to it.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Member for his intervention, but I have to say no. There has been enough delay already. It is important that the document goes out for consultation now. Let the people decide, because they are the ones who matter. This is about children with special educational needs and their families; it is not up to the Assembly or the Executive to hold the up consultation.

[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: It would seem that the Member has finished.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 22; Noes 41.

AYES

Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr Dodds, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Storey.

Tellers for the Ayes: Miss McIlveen and Mr Storey.

NOES

Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr Doherty, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Brady and Mr F McCann.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 41; Noes 27.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr Doherty, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Brady and Mr F McCann.

NOES

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

Tellers for the Noes: Miss McIlveen and Mr Storey.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Mr Cree, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage.

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to agree to publishing, for consultation, the special educational needs and inclusion policy proposals tabled to it by the Minister of Education, thereby enabling the £25 million ring-fenced by the Minister of Education to be used to implement the changes that will benefit all children with special educational needs.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker:*]

ADJOURNMENT

Flooding in Andersonstown and Falls

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes to propose, and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately eight minutes.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Business Committee for permitting the Adjournment debate to take place, and I thank the Minister for his attendance this afternoon. I am sure that he anticipates that, over the next 15 minutes, I may put three or four questions to him for answer either today or subsequently.

It may be a twist of irony that the weather over the past two or three weeks brings into sharp relief the relevance of the topic. It is a reminder of what people had to endure last year and may yet have to endure this year. I want to articulate some issues and probe the Minister and the Assembly on several matters that have yet to be addressed.

It is important to put on record in the Chamber the narrative of what happened last August, not only in west Belfast but in other parts of the city, so that the acute circumstances that were faced by too many families in the city will be better understood. I asked a Glenhill resident, therefore, to provide a personal narrative of her experience on 16 August 2008. She said:

“I was looking out my window when I noticed a deluge of water coming from the back garden and I knew that we were going to be flooded again. Over a period of 40 years the residents of Glenhill have had 4 floods and numerous scares of flooding, probably over 200. If there was heavy rain we would rush out and open the manholes. You always lived in constant fear that the flooding would reoccur.”

She continues by describing what happened on Saturday 16 August 2008:

“We had less than 5 minutes warning from the street being clear to water entering the house. The water came up to our knees and there was absolutely nothing we could have done to prevent this happening...The damage was extensive to the ground floor with wooden floors being lifted, all the suites under water, all the white goods and kitchen units ruined and electrical goods destroyed. This water was contaminated with sewerage as several of the homeowners had to open the sewerage grates to try and get rid of the water...At the back of our houses there is a small river which runs the full length of the street. This river had been the cause of numerous floods during heavy rain falls and been piped off by the Rivers Agency years previous.”

The resident describes what happened at a meeting that was held the following week:

“The Rivers Agency claimed this had nothing to do with them and it was the responsibility of the homeowners. I asked all the residents individually if they had piped off the river running at the back of the houses. Obviously they all replied they did not. I then asked the representative from the Rivers Agency if they had piped off the river. He said they had so I said it was their responsibility as they had not made the pipes big enough to deal with such a large amount of water. The representative for the Rivers Agency had a map of the river and said ‘I can see the problem already.’ Apparently there is a large pipe at the top of the street which takes the water, the pipe then narrows, and then later splits into 2. The force of the water was that great that the covers had blown 12 feet into the air. Some of the covers have never been found.”

Her narrative continues at length, and I may return to it later.

A similar story could be told by people who live in the Stockman’s Lane area, Rodney Parade, the Beechmount area, York Road, Shore Road, Carrington Street, Orangefield and the Castlereagh Road. Those areas were most acutely affected on that Saturday and Sunday.

In the course of that weekend, 165 phone calls were made by people who were distressed about what was happening in or around their properties. As a consequence of that, 347 emergency payments were made, on top of the 609 that were made in June 2007. However, on the eve of our rainy season and with the Met Office saying that this summer will be warmer, sunnier and wetter than average, the question is whether the flooding and subsequent problems that arose in 2008 will reoccur in 2009.

I want to probe that matter in three ways. As the Glenhill resident outlined, the essential problem there is that a 750 mm river pipe must be replaced with a 1,500 mm river pipe. Last year’s circumstances have led to the Rivers Agency conducting a feasibility study and cost-benefit analysis for doing that. I understand that the Rivers Agency had hoped to complete the work to rectify the pipe problem by the end of the past financial year. However, on 3 March this year, the Rivers Agency advised Glenhill residents that the cost of the work to be undertaken meant that the matter had to be referred to the Drainage Council, which was not due to meet until May or June. Therefore, work in that neighbourhood would have to wait until later in the summer. In my view, that is not good enough.

When there is a problem and the solution to it is clear, how can the acute risk faced by Glenhill be prolonged by a bureaucratic process around the costing and approval of the required work? When a problem has existed for years and when the solution has been identified and clearly acknowledged, why can that work not be done in quick time? In responding to my questions this afternoon, I want the Minister to update the Assembly on where this issue now lies. Will the Minister tell us what can be done to accelerate that process? In particular, will the Minister tell us when

the offending pipes, for want of a better term, will be replaced?

The delay in replacing the pipes and fundamentally resolving the problem leads me to the next issue. People in areas of flood risk are having difficulty in securing insurance because companies are now, perhaps understandably from their point of view, asking for details of the permanent measures being undertaken by the Rivers Agency to resolve problems arising from the Blackstaff River in the Glenhill area and in other potential flood-risk areas of Belfast. Some people with a certain level of exposure face the summer without knowing for sure that they will have insurance cover for their properties. As the Glenhill resident outlined, the risk to their property and possessions is enormous.

In July 2008, in response to the flooding problem in England, the Association of British Insurers and the Government agreed to flood insurance being made widely available in both the short and long term. I understand that useful conversations have taken place and are ongoing in respect of the situation in the North. However, will the Minister state where we now are in providing the necessary information on flood risk to insurers? In particular, is it the case that the strategic flood map that is being prepared is not sufficiently detailed and accurate to determine the flood risk to specific properties or locations? Is the strategic flood map fit to be used to identify flood risk to particular properties and, consequently, their insurance requirements? Can it be used to reassure insurance companies about the risk to commercial as opposed to domestic properties?

A broader concern arises — not just in west Belfast, although it is particularly acute there — about overdevelopment and whether the water and sewerage infrastructure in some areas is fit for purpose and whether it can deal with future flood risk. I know that that strays more into the responsibility of the Department of the Environment and the Planning Service, but Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 15, which was issued in 2006, sets out guidance on planning and flood risk. It contains land-use planning policies to deal with the flood risk in parts of the North.

In light of the experiences of the past two years, I urge the Minister for Regional Development to speak to the Minister of the Environment to determine whether PPS 15 is all that it needs to be in relation to the flood risk to properties in Belfast and beyond. Scotland's equivalent, Planning Policy Statement 7, states that people should err on the side of caution when developing areas of flood risk. I am concerned because there has been such intense development in west Belfast, and there will be more in future, much of which is very welcome because of the need for social and other housing. Is the balance right between erring

on the side of caution and allowing developments to proceed? Planning Policy Statement 15 should be looked at in that regard.

Last August, many people and agencies, including the emergency services, worked hard in response to a very difficult situation, and nothing should diminish their contributions in mitigating the acute situation that too many people in this city faced. I also acknowledge that since last August there have been structural and policy developments in central and local government that could mitigate future risk. None of my questions should take away from the positive work of the past 10 months.

The people of Glenhill and of other parts of Belfast had to fight insurance battles because of what they experienced that Saturday afternoon; some people were out of their houses for nine months, returning only in recent weeks. There is a risk in that area and in other parts of the city. Is everything in place or will it be in place by the middle of August to ensure that, as far as possible, every action has been taken to guarantee that there will not be a repetition of what transpired in August of last year in Glenhill and in other parts of the city?

That question lingers, doubts persist, and the risk remains. I hope that the Minister will reassure the people of Glenhill and of other parts of Belfast who, over many years, have suffered the danger of flooding.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for bringing the debate to the Floor. I concur with what he said. As someone who lives in that area, I know well the consequences of what was faced on 16 August 2008. That day, I was stuck in my car for about two and a half hours due to the underpass being flooded and the diversion that was in place around Belfast. When we managed to get home, I made a record of the number of phone calls that I received and made that evening: there were around 50 or 60, many from residents who had phoned me, and I phoned them back or contacted the Departments.

I agree with Alex Attwood that the issue of flooding is relevant not only to the Department for Regional Development but to other Departments. That evening, I contacted the Roads Service, the Rivers Agency, which is an agency within the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and the Housing Executive, which is the responsibility of the Department for Social Development. I also contacted Belfast City Council and many other bodies that evening. The last phone calls that I took and made were around 11.30 pm. That was after being out in some of the affected areas, where I saw at first hand the state in which places were left after the heavy downpour that occurred that evening.

We spoke to people about the flooding of their homes. Glenhill took the brunt of that because the

Blackstaff River burst. When we went there and inspected the area outside people's homes, we saw that manholes had blown off and water was going 20 ft or 30 ft into the air, which destroyed many homes in the area. The extent of the damage could still be seen days afterwards. People have only recently returned to some of those houses.

The issue of insurance companies has been raised. If there is anything that the Assembly can do, it is to put pressure on insurance companies to step up to the mark. Many of the people who have been affected will not be able to insure their homes again, and there are still delays with some payments, not only in Glenhill but in many other areas of west Belfast and, I am sure, throughout the North of Ireland.

I have copies of correspondence from 18 August 2008, which was the Monday following the flood. Those are letters from my office to the various Departments, stating clearly that we want to get the issue resolved. On 18 August, we called for a full investigation into why the flooding occurred and how it was allowed to happen again after it had happened in previous years. That put the marker down to the Departments that we wanted a full investigation to be carried out because we did not want to see anything similar again.

Ms J McCann: Does the Member agree that, beyond the scenario of the 16 August flooding, there were and still are major roads in and out of west Belfast — in particular in the Colin area, the main Stewartstown Road, the Cherry Road and Summerhill Road — that flood when there is heavy rain? Does he agree that that is down to the lack of adequate drainage systems on those main arterial routes?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr P Maskey: Thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus go raibh maith agat fosta, a Jennifer. There are many issues and that is why we called for the investigation into how the problems occurred. The Department for Regional Development has carried out some investigations. From a very early stage, among our priorities was making sure that lessons are learned from that incident because it must not be allowed to be repeated.

Mr Attwood mentioned the Rivers Agency on a number of occasions. After the source of the flooding was identified, most of the responsibility for sorting it out lay with that agency. We called for the agency to make it a paramount priority in its work scheme to ensure that the necessary work was urgently carried out after the surveys.

4.15 pm

I regret that individuals in the Rivers Agency told us that the situation would be sorted out as a matter of urgency. Some of the correspondence that I received from the Rivers Agency stated that the matter would be given high priority, and, at that stage, I was told that it was hoped that the work would be carried out by mid-February. I sent a letter to the Rivers Agency in which I welcomed that development and said that I hoped that the work would be done. I also said that, if they encountered any problems that would prevent them from resolving the matter by mid-February, I would try, in my role as an elected representative for West Belfast, to assist them in overruling any difficulties. However, I was left in no doubt that the Rivers Agency was still hopeful that the work would be carried out by mid-February.

After speaking to residents who informed me that the work had not been carried out by March, April or even May, I phoned the Rivers Agency. Indeed, the work has not been carried out as yet. I ask the Minister for Regional Development to take that forward to the Executive, particularly to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, given that the Rivers Agency falls within her remit. I have raised this issue to ensure that that happens, and we have received correspondence saying that it is hoped that the work will be done in the near future. Since the Minister for Regional Development is in the Chamber, as Alex Attwood said, it would be remiss of Members not to take the opportunity to urge him to raise with the Minister of the Environment some of the issues that have been mentioned.

Through talking to people, we see that they are upset greatly by what happened, and we must ensure that the effects of any future heavy rainfall are reduced. Nobody could have accounted for the rainfall of somewhere over 60 mm that fell that night. According to different forecasts, the rainfall was higher, but we cannot say that there will not be such heavy rainfall again. It is hoped that it will not rain so heavily again, but all efforts must be made to ensure that such flooding does not happen again. We must pull out all the stops to ensure that the required work is carried out.

People's kitchens and homes were devastated. Council representatives went into the local leisure centres and assisted people. That may or may not have been good enough. I know that the Minister for Regional Development, along with the Minister of the Environment, was on site in parts of west Belfast a few days after the heavy rain; in fact, it might have been the day after the rainfall. People came out and tried to help.

I visited some houses, and I saw that the heavy rain was coming in through the roof and that water was coming down walls and into fuse boxes. I mentioned

the Housing Executive earlier, because I was in a house in Lenadoon, which is not far from the Andersonstown area. A subcontractor from the Housing Executive had fitted a new fuse box recently in that house, and there was silver paper around a fuse that had blown at some stage. That put someone's life at risk. That example demonstrates that dealing with the effects of the floods is the responsibility of many Departments.

I have written to the Department for Regional Development again regarding some parts of the drainage system in Kennedy Way in the Andersonstown area. I have been rapping people's doors recently, and they have been telling me that it has been a while since the drainage system has been cleared. I would like to think that Roads Service can and should check the drainage system more regularly, because, as has been said, a lot of new developments have been built recently in west Belfast, and, by the look of things, a lot more will be built in the future. Checks should be made to see whether the infrastructure is in place to allow that to happen. As well as that, the drainage system should be checked regularly.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend the Member for securing the Adjournment debate. This is an issue that had an impact on many thousands of people across Belfast last August. Although the rainfall of that period was extreme and unusual, it raised a number of problems that need to be addressed for the future.

I remember the outcry when the new underpass on the Westlink was flooded. People asked how that could happen to such a new and modern road. For the people whom I represent, the flooding of the Westlink was a blessing. Had it not happened, areas such as St James's and the Village would have found themselves under many feet of water. However, that is not unusual for the people of those areas; they have grown up with vivid memories of their areas being flooded.

Many people say that it is great to live beside a worldwide nature reserve such as the Bog Meadows. However, that brings with it many problems, one of which is periodic flooding. Many rivers flow from Black Mountain and Divis Mountain to the Bog Meadows, and from there they flow into rivers that run through local communities. Many older residents say that, in the past, sluice gates at the junction of the old Donegall Road roundabout and Broadway were closed at times of heavy rain to ensure that the city centre was not flooded. The result was that communities in that area bore the brunt of flooding.

Recently, people in areas such as Beechmount, parts of the Falls Road and Andersonstown and many other parts of the city bore the heartache of having their homes damaged by floods. Many of those people are still trying to put their lives and homes back in order.

We must ask whether we learned anything from that and whether we are prepared for the next floods. We must also ask whether we did enough for those who suffered from the serious events of 2008.

The fundamental issue is ensuring that we are prepared for that type of emergency in future. Many local people say that the inspection and cleaning of street gullies is a problem. In the St James's area, many gullies were blocked during the last floods. The problem must be rectified by regular checks.

Work that is carried out by utility companies and Departments leaves a patchwork of repairs across roads. That impacts on drainage and leaves many uneven road surfaces, which results in water lying in large pools. That causes major problems, which, if not dealt with, add to serious flooding at times of heavy rain.

The ongoing development of land along the heights of west Belfast is the biggest problem. Previously, that land might have soaked up the surplus water that now flows through channels to flood the lower ground. That puts a twofold pressure on the system: at times of flooding, sewage pours from sewers; and rivers burst their banks. Many new housing developments have not been thought out fully. Rather than being part of a longer-term strategy, housing is built in small developments.

Ms J McCann: Does the Member agree that not enough thought goes into the planning of drainage for such developments? I am thinking, in particular, of some areas of Poleglass, such as Glenkeen, where two families' homes have been routinely flooded during the past 20 to 25 years. When those homes were built, not enough thought was given to the planning of drainage for surplus water in heavy rain.

Mr F McCann: That is a fair point. In developments on Suffolk Road, some of the pumping systems that were installed to deal with sewage have been unable to cope, and sewage has been running into local rivers.

Small housing developments put pressures on a system that was not designed to take such a flow of sewage or water. I realise that the Minister for Regional Development is in the Chamber, but this is a multi-departmental problem that can only be sorted out by taking a multi-departmental approach. Planners, the Department for Social Development, the Rivers Agency and other bodies must play their part. If we are to tackle the problem, we need to take a co-ordinated approach that the Executive should oversee.

At present, there is a lull in the construction industry because of the serious economic problems. What better time is there to develop a strategy that will deal with flooding problems? If we do not grasp the nettle, we will undoubtedly be back, time and again, to ask the same old question: where did we go wrong? The

people of west Belfast demand leadership, and it is up to us to ensure that that leadership is provided.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): A LeasCheann Comhairle, I thank Members for the debate. It is clear from the contributions of Alex Attwood and other Members that this is a cross-departmental issue, and the response to it should also be cross-departmental. Nevertheless, in a debate such as this, only one Minister responds, and I will endeavour to answer some of the points that have been raised. However, some points clearly relate to the Rivers Agency, which falls under the remit of DARD; others relate to planning matters and how some of the Housing Executive's properties were maintained. I will endeavour to answer for the other Departments as best I can. Some specific points have been made, and, if I cannot answer them, I will ensure that a copy of the Hansard report is distributed to the relevant Ministers, and I will ask them to respond in writing.

Comments have been made about the ongoing flooding issues, such as surface water on roads and so on. However, the specific incident is the severe flooding that occurred on 16 August 2008, which was caused by extreme levels of heavy, persistent rainfall. It is estimated that between 60 mm and 80 mm of rain fell during the day, which exceeded the total rainfall that would normally be expected for the whole month. As a result, the design capacity of the drainage network was exceeded, and, in some places, totally overwhelmed. That was compounded by the rainfall, which caused surcharging of rivers and watercourses into which the drainage system would normally discharge.

In retrospect, it is widely acknowledged that no sewerage system could have coped with rainfall of that intensity. Consequently, although Northern Ireland Water will continue to monitor and improve its network to reduce the risk of future flooding, it must be recognised that it is not possible to guarantee that such flooding will not reoccur in similar weather conditions.

NIW has advised that there were two main localised flooding incidents in the Andersonstown Road and Falls Road areas that related to infrastructural problems on 16 August 2008. As Paul Maskey said, I had the opportunity on Sunday 17 August, the day after the flooding, to visit east Belfast, the Beechmount area and the Broadway underpass, which drew most of the media attention. However, the most difficult issues to face were those that involved the flooding of people's homes. My sympathy is with the people affected. Unfortunately, during the previous summer, I had to visit homes in east Belfast and in the Lower Ormeau areas where flooding had also occurred.

There is a responsibility on all Government agencies and Departments to do everything that is reasonable and possible to ensure that those incidents do not

happen again, or, if they do, that it is not as a consequence of the failure of a system that has been put in place by the various Government agencies.

There was localised flooding in the vicinity of numbers 117 to 119 Stockman's Lane. That general area is upstream of the upper Falls wastewater pumping station, which was overwhelmed as a result of the exceptional conditions on that day. Although attributed to the conditions at that time, the main sewer in Stockman's Lane, which runs through Shane Retail Park, has since been de-silted as a precaution. It was also found that a parallel road drainage line was heavily silted, and the Roads Service has subsequently addressed that matter.

Alex Attwood gave us fairly graphic details of what happened at Glenhill Park, and my sympathy is with the people affected. NIW was on site following the flooding on 16 August 2008, and an inspection indicated that a Rivers Agency culvert to the rear of the houses in Glenhill Park surcharged and caused flooding in the area. The sewerage system was, in turn, overwhelmed as the flood material entered the NIW system. That area is off the Glen Road and under the shadow of Black Hill, from where the run-off to that river would originate.

I understand that Rivers Agency officials met the residents and their representatives the week after the event, and the emergency interim works proposed to reduce the risk of the recurrence of flooding were carried out within one week of that meeting. Further long-term work is proposed by the Rivers Agency to replace the pipes where the blockage occurred, to which Alex Attwood referred. That work is programmed for June and July 2009, pending approval by the Drainage Council, and I understand the point made by Alex Attwood and Paul Maskey that people expected that work to have happened earlier. I sincerely hope that Drainage Council approval will be forthcoming. However, I will raise the issue with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to try to ensure that the work that residents were promised will be carried out as quickly as possible.

NIW is not aware of any other particular flooding in the Andersonstown, Beechmount, Falls or Westlink areas relating to defects in infrastructure. Of course, if any Member has concerns about a specific location, I will arrange for Northern Ireland Water to investigate and report back to the Member.

With regard to road drainage, the extreme flooding that occurred on that Saturday and Sunday in August was not caused by any failure to maintain the operational effectiveness of the storm water gullies or the road drainage system. The road drainage infrastructure was simply overwhelmed by the deluge of rain that fell on Saturday 16 August 2008. Although the torrential

rainfall throughout that Saturday was particularly bad, resulting in some of the worst flooding in recent times, it had been preceded by other spells of very wet weather.

4.30 pm

It is also clear that, while a large number of roads were flooded, this was in the vast majority of cases caused by rivers overflowing. As a result, very few of the roads-related flooding incidents were caused by shortcomings in the road drainage infrastructure. Generally, the road drainage infrastructure was fully operational and simply overwhelmed by the intensity and duration of the rain.

The Broadway underpass flooding was mentioned, and I have previously reported to the Assembly that Roads Service has commissioned an independent review of the issues associated with the design and the operational response to the flooding incident. The independent report on the flooding incident at Broadway has been received, and its conclusions and recommendations have been accepted in full. A number of recommended measures have been implemented to ensure public safety. Roads Service, in partnership with the Rivers Agency and the contractor, has also commissioned a physical and mathematical model and study of the Clowney /Blackstaff river system that flows through Broadway to help us understand the river system and identify any additional mitigation measures that could be put in place to further reduce the possibility of a recurrence of flooding incidents. That report is due in June.

Members will be aware that responsibility for drainage infrastructure is shared between my Department and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development through Rivers Agency, Roads Service and NI Water, the three main drainage organisations. The proceedings for liaison and co-ordination of emergency response between the three organisations are set out in the inter-agency flooding information pack.

There is also a shared flooding hot spot list which identifies areas at greatest risk of flooding and the lead drainage organisation for each location. Those organisations also take the lead in the development and implementation of measures to reduce the likelihood of future flooding at those hot spots. In addition, hot spot lists are held by each of the drainage organisations, and they each have their own programmes for dealing with those on a priority basis.

In the case of Roads Service, the problems encountered at flooding locations are not always easy to resolve, as the solution may be prohibitively expensive or not immediately obvious. Even with the most careful and thorough of planning, gullies, road drainage and watercourses can simply be overwhelmed by a deluge of rain falling within a short period.

Roads Service has plans in place to deal with road-related flooding incidents which ensure that a 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week response is available. Roads Service co-ordinates with and works alongside NI Water, Rivers Agency and the other responding organisations, including the PSNI, local councils, the Fire and Rescue Service and other statutory agencies as far as possible to ensure a quick and appropriate response to flooding incidents.

In its response to flooding, Roads Service seeks to restore normality to flooded roads, having regard to the safety of members of the public and Roads Service personnel, the prevention of traffic disruption and the protection of homes and property. If Roads Service becomes aware of roads that are flooded, signs are erected, where practicable, advertising the possible risks to road users. However, in the event of widespread flooding, resources are targeted at busier routes which carry a greater volume of traffic.

Roads Service has a programme of planned maintenance to ensure that the network remains safe and serviceable. Priorities are assessed using information obtained from condition surveys, other work programmes and professional engineering assessments by Roads Service engineers. Roads Service also aims to inspect and clean, where necessary, all gullies in urban areas twice a year. That point was raised by Fra McCann. That policy ensures that a reasonable level of maintenance is carried out to drainage systems —

Mr F McCann: It may be well and good that the drains are inspected. However, continuous work is carried out on roads and streets, and a lot of rubble and stuff goes into drains and blocks them. Recently, I was in touch with Roads Service in relation to Beechmount Avenue and other places where, continuously, there are puddles of water which in heavy rain rise over kerbs towards the level of houses. It is a constant concern for residents. The process needs to be improved.

The Minister for Regional Development: I take the Member's point. Where utilities or contractors building houses interfere with roads, a bond is paid. They are required to reinstate the road to the condition that it was in before the work. If there are particular issues in relation to the inspection of that and the impact that some of it has in gullies and the ability of the road to drain, I will bring it to the attention of Roads Service. If the Member has some particular instances in mind, in Beechmount or elsewhere, I will bring them to the attention of Roads Service. However, there is a requirement on anyone who interferes through work with the road surface or drainage to reinstate the condition of the road.

In addition to the scheduled operations on road gullies, clearing of blocked gullies is carried out,

particularly where fallen leaves represent an ongoing problem at certain times of the year or where there is a history of gullies becoming blocked for other reasons.

After the flooding incident in August 2008, I asked Roads Service to carry out an internal review of its response and procedures. From that review, an action plan was developed that covered a number of aspects of Roads Service's flooding response. Those action points are now being implemented.

Over the past 12 months, Roads Service and the other two agencies that deal with drainage have put considerable time and effort into developing a flooding incident line. The telephone number for that service was released in January 2009 and is now available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I fully appreciate that it is important for people to know who to contact for help when they are faced with the possibility of their house being flooded. Members of the public no longer have to decide which organisation to ring; they can simply contact the flooding incident line, where the details of the incident will be recorded and passed to the relevant agency.

As I said, I can assure Members that, having visited a number of sites over the past couple of years, I am aware of the trauma and stress that flooding causes, particularly when the system becomes overwhelmed and sewage leaks into the flood water. I am also aware of the responsibility that Government agencies have to do everything that is reasonably possible to ensure that such incidents do not reoccur.

Some Members raised issues relating to planning. If planning policies, such as PPS 15, are found to be deficient, they should be looked at. That is particularly the case in relation to areas such as west Belfast or east Belfast, where people are continuing to build developments in the Castlereagh hills. The potential redevelopment of the Glen 10 sites in the Glenmona area of west Belfast will create drainage and sewage issues for those developments and the developments below them, because water will run down the hill to those lower sites, where it will not be absorbed into the ground.

I am quite happy to discuss such planning issues with the Minister of the Environment to ensure that, with future developments, it is not only the requirements for those developments that are taken into account but the knock-on effect of those developments on the surrounding area. Members raised some other issues that are the direct responsibility of other Ministers. I will ensure that the Hansard report is studied and that we bring those issues to the attention of the relevant Departments.

I accept the argument that all agencies have a responsibility to work together. Obviously, there is more scope for that now that we have a local Executive and Ministers who are able to bring agencies together.

On the Sunday after the flooding incident last August, the Minister of the Environment and I managed to pull together a number of agencies and get an immediate report on what was happening. We should take full advantage of that facility to ensure that all agencies work together. As the Minister responsible for Roads Service and NIW, I will ensure that those agencies, as well as others, play their full part in doing that.

Once again, I thank the Members for their contributions. More than one Department has responsibility for this issue, and I endeavoured to answer questions about some of the issues for which other Ministers have responsibility. However, I will ensure that those issues are addressed and that Members get the proper response from the Ministers concerned. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Adjourned at 4.38 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 26 May 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MATTERS OF THE DAY

Mr Kevin McDaid

Mr Speaker: Mr Gerry Adams and Mr Francie Brolly have sought leave to make a statement on a matter that fulfils the criteria that are set out in Standing Order 24. I shall call Mr Gerry Kelly to speak for up to three minutes on the subject. I shall then call a representative from each of the other parties, as agreed with the Whips. Those Members will also have up to three minutes to speak on the matter.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I send condolences from Sinn Féin to Mrs McDaid. I hope that, on this occasion, I speak for the whole Chamber in sending those condolences. Anyone who heard Mrs McDaid speak on the radio this morning about the terrible death of her husband, Kevin McDaid, could not be anything but moved.

It was a terrible and brutal killing. Mrs McDaid went to the aid of her husband and was also beaten. Her friend, who is pregnant, went to assist, and she too was beaten. We could have been looking at three deaths. We are told that up to 50 loyalists went into the estate. This is a time for the Chamber to have a unified voice and to let anyone and everyone who cares to listen know that sectarian attacks are unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

Unfortunately, the attack brings back memories of the terrible death that young Michael McIlveen endured. Mr McDaid was in a mixed marriage and was well known in the area as a cross-community worker, and this was not the first time that had been beaten. He had also been attacked within the past two years. Our first thoughts are for Mrs McDaid and her children. According to this morning's newspapers, Mr McDaid initially went out to make sure that his son was safe, and he lost his own life over it.

Another young man, who has been named locally as Damian Fleming, is in a critical condition and is fighting for his life in hospital.

The Assembly sends its condolences to everyone who has been affected by those events; in the past, it has spoken with a unified voice on such incidents. I call for that unified voice to be heard now so that people who get involved in sectarian attacks understand that they have no excuse. Regardless of where sectarianism comes from, the Assembly condemns it utterly. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Mr Campbell: I join the Member in offering my sympathies and condolences and those of the DUP to the McDaid family. The murder of Kevin Brendan McDaid, who was a father of four children, must be and is condemned by every Assembly Member.

As with every murder, irrespective of when and by whom it is committed, it is necessary that information be passed to the police so that it can be translated into evidence and the perpetrators brought before a court of law. That is the only way that such incidents will stop and that the perpetrators will realise that there is no escape from justice.

I am the MP and MLA for the area in which Mr McDaid lived. The Heights is a mixed area of Coleraine, and, by and large, families there get on well together; indeed, Mr McDaid was involved in cross-community work. In recent years, however, the Heights has been blighted by a small number of individuals who engage in antisocial behaviour, drug dealing, car theft and other petty crimes; all of which pale into insignificance compared with Mr McDaid's murder.

At this time, the police need support, just as the family does. I call for that support to be unanimous throughout the House and the wider community.

Mr McClarty: Like the two previous Members, I extend my deepest sympathies and those of the Ulster Unionist Party to Evelyn, Kevin's widow, and to their entire family circle. Mr McDaid's death was tragic, violent, and it should never have occurred. Like other Members, I appeal to anyone who saw anything suspicious to pass that information — even the smallest snippet — to the PSNI so that those who are responsible for that evil deed are brought to justice.

I was born and bred in the Heights area of Coleraine; a fact of which I am proud. I was educated in the area. I went and still go to church in the area. I was married there. The residents of the Killowen/Heights area of Coleraine are a people apart; they are wonderful individuals who care for one another. Unfortunately, as Mr Campbell said, a small number of individuals has spoiled the peace that the community has enjoyed for many years.

Certain people try to portray what is happening in the Heights as widespread sectarianism; nothing could be further from the truth. The vast majority of people in the area simply want to live in peace and harmony with their neighbours, and individuals and groups are working towards that end.

Now, more than ever, I call on the community to come together to isolate the men of violence who have perpetrated this heinous crime and to rid the streets of Coleraine and every other street in Northern Ireland of all forms of sectarianism.

Mr Dallat: I am glad of the opportunity to join other Members to express the SDLP's condolences to Evelyn McDaid and her family and friends on the tragic death of Kevin.

Although the tragedy directly affects the McDaid family, it is a far greater tragedy than that. The McDaid family's loss is Coleraine's loss. Indeed, it is a serious loss to the countless people across Northern Ireland who yearn for a new dawn and a new beginning and who have responded accordingly, directly to the family and through the media. Let us hope, indeed pray, that Kevin McDaid's death is not in vain. Let us hope that out of this darkness a new beacon will be lit that lifts the cloud of despair that hangs over Coleraine today. That would bring some comfort to the McDaid family and to Kevin's widow, who, this morning, courageously called for no retaliation. I hope that her wishes are respected. It would certainly please Kevin, who spent his life working for peace and reconciliation. The people of Coleraine — Catholic and Protestant — want to be free to build that new future. They want to be free from mob law, from lynch mobs and from the lawless organisations of the past that failed everyone and, sadly, still exist.

I was at the scene yesterday, and I heard graphic accounts of the events that led to the tragedy. I heard about the sheer hate, the foul language, the cudgels and hammers and, of course, the physical violence. That is not the Coleraine that I or anyone else wants. Yesterday afternoon, I met the PSNI, and I hope that its resources, which I saw at the police station, will be successful and will put away those who know only violence and despair and who, in the past as in the future, have brought nothing to Coleraine for ordinary, decent people to build on. They were the building blocks of failure. However, I assure the House that many people in Coleraine want to be the building blocks of a new future — one in which Kevin McDaid and others will not die.

Mr Ford: On behalf of the United Community group, I express my sympathy to Mrs Evelyn McDaid, her family circle and her neighbours who suffered in that dreadful attack.

The murder was a dreadful crime, and it is right that every corner of the House and every part of wider

society has condemned it in the same way that we have, sadly, condemned the recent murders of others, particularly the two soldiers and the policeman who died in March. Tragically, in this case, the murderers did not descend from Mars; they came from somewhere else in the Coleraine area. Therefore, people must have information that could help to ensure that the perpetrators are put behind bars, and we should all appeal to those with any information to bring it to the police. The aspiration of the majority of local people is that we move forward together in peace and harmony.

In this place, our progress may sometimes falter. However, we have at least set an example through seeking to work together. Many others in the community work to promote cross-community activity and to build good relations in different parts of Northern Ireland. Kevin McDaid was one of them. We owe it to his memory to ensure that that good work is done and is supported by the whole society.

Ms Purvis: I offer my party's condolences to Mrs McDaid, her boys, her family and her friends. Furthermore, I send my thoughts to Mr Fleming and his family and hope that he makes a full recovery.

This is an awful murder, and I encourage anyone with information to help the police to bring those responsible to justice. Those involved only serve the aims of extremists on both sides. That fact was made clear several weeks ago through the murders of two sappers and a policeman. Sectarianism is a deadly virus that affects our whole community, not only in deprived areas, but in every class. The murder of Kevin McDaid is an example of sectarianism at its ugliest and most brutal. It is at its most sinister when it is unseen and unheard and when it is institutionalised, as it is in our society.

It is our responsibility to tackle that deadly virus together, and I look forward to the publication of the strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration as the Executive's first step to dealing with that deadly virus. "Separate but equal" will not result in the shared and better future that we all crave.

10.45 am

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Short-Term Aid Scheme for Business

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that she wishes to make a statement on the short-term aid scheme for business in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I wish to make a statement on the introduction of a £15 million short-term aid scheme for business in Northern Ireland. My Executive colleagues and I have been acutely aware over the past months of the difficulties that companies right across Northern Ireland face in the wake of the global economic crisis. We have witnessed a significant increase in redundancy notices and company closures, which have fed into the unemployment numbers and have posed real difficulties for companies and individuals.

After my statement, the Minister for Employment and Learning will make a statement on actions that his Department is taking in response to the difficulties that companies are experiencing. For my part, I tasked my officials some months ago with devising proposals to help fundamentally viable companies that are facing short-term difficulties to weather the economic storm.

In mid-December 2008, by way of response to the global credit crunch, the European Commission issued a temporary community framework for state-aid measures to support access to finance in the current financial and economic crisis, because it believed:

“the current global crisis requires exceptional policy responses.”

One measure — small amounts of compatible aid — offers member states the opportunity to assist companies with relatively modest amounts of support without detrimentally affecting competition in the European Union. The amount is set at up to €500,000 before tax deduction or other charges.

That element of the temporary framework operates within de minimis aid regulations, and the Commission recognises the potential need for a greater quantum of support at this time than would be available under normal de minimis aid rules, which normally allow up to €200,000 to be administered. The Commission takes the view that to assist one company at the revised de minimis level of support under the temporary framework in acknowledged extraordinary circumstances will not distort its competition with others.

In January 2009, the UK Government notified a £1 billion umbrella scheme to the Commission for providing business support of up to €500,000 per company during the period to 31 December 2010. That specifically notified measure is designed to address potential damage to the UK economy through the possible loss of fundamentally viable companies as a result of the global financial crisis. The UK measure, however, is not a scheme in its own right. It is up to the devolved Administrations and England’s regional development agencies (RDAs) to develop their own proposals to meet their region’s specific needs within the terms of the UK’s notified measure. In its proposals, the Economic Development Forum (EDF) subgroup outlined a desire for Northern Ireland to take advantage of the temporary framework’s provisions.

My officials have been working on developing a scheme for Northern Ireland, and I can now inform Members that a £15 million grant scheme to support eligible companies that are experiencing difficulties in the current economic climate will be introduced from Monday 1 June 2009. The scheme’s objective is to provide eligible businesses with financial assistance that will enable them to plan and, where necessary, restructure for the future, while retaining key staff so that they are ready to take advantage of an economic upturn.

The scheme, which is to be known as the short-term aid scheme, will offer support over and above what Government have already established and what the banks have so far announced. The scheme, which Invest Northern Ireland will operate, will run until 31 December 2010. Assistance will be based on maintaining the employment of key skilled workers in a supported business who would otherwise have to be released. Maximum support per business will be €500,000, which is approximately £445,000 at current exchange rates, less the value of other de minimis aid offered to the business between 1 January 2008 and 31 December 2010.

Costs incurred that are beyond 31 December 2010 are not eligible for support. Those rules comply with Commission regulations.

The short-term aid scheme will be available to large companies, SMEs and microbusinesses in the manufacturing and tradeable services sectors that are fundamentally viable and were not in difficulty at 1 July 2008 but are experiencing short-term difficulties because of the global downturn. The business concerned should also have or have the potential to have total sales of more than £100,000 per annum by 31 December 2010, more than 25% of which should be from outside Northern Ireland. Alternatively, it should have total external sales of more than £250,000 per annum.

Companies will be expected to demonstrate on their application form their need for support, the costs that are involved, and the steps that they are taking or have

taken to address their difficulties. They should also identify the key skilled posts that they wish to retain and the proposed activities that will be undertaken. Those activities could, for example, be related to individual training, developing leads and undertaking market research into new niche markets, and secondments from larger companies to improve the capabilities of local SMEs while retaining the individual secondees on the books of the larger company.

Where training activities are proposed, there will be close co-operation between my officials in Invest Northern Ireland and officials in the Department for Employment and Learning to ensure that a comprehensive, practical response is provided to the company in question. An Invest Northern Ireland selection panel will assess cases that are presented for support, and applicants will be notified of the panel's decision. A flat rate of grant assistance will be offered that is based on company size, according to the European Commission's definition of a company. That will be 80% for SMEs that have fewer than 50 employees, 70% for SMEs with between 50 and 250 employees, and 60% for non-SMEs. Salaries and some associated costs for the key skilled posts that are identified will be supported.

I mentioned support that the Government have introduced already. In order to bring a degree of clarity to the range of financial support that is available to Northern Ireland SMEs and to help them through the difficulties arising from the current economic downturn, my Department has prepared an easy-to-read compendium. It is available in tabular form on the Department's website. It is not an exhaustive list of all forms of support; instead, it provides a snapshot of the main European, United Kingdom and Northern Ireland schemes that were introduced recently as a direct response to the economic downturn. Those include the European Investment Bank funding, the UK-wide enterprise finance guarantee scheme and Invest Northern Ireland's accelerated support fund.

To date, the table has been used as part of wider briefing material for Minister's meetings with the main Northern Ireland banks to discuss lending practices. The recent Institute of Directors bank lending survey showed that businesses do not appear to be sufficiently aware of the various local funding schemes that are available. I am, therefore, keen to widen knowledge of the various forms of support that our SMEs can access.

Having distributed the table in Government, I have arranged for it to be circulated to the Economic Development Forum and the cross-sector advisory forum to ensure that the information reaches business representative organisations and their members. I understand that the table is being highlighted already by the Institute of Directors on its Nlcrunchtalk website.

The table shows that, in addition to the short-term aid scheme that is being introduced today, Northern Ireland businesses can avail themselves of a number of other schemes. Some of those are available via Invest Northern Ireland, but others can be accessed through local banks. I have encouraged local banks to make maximum use of the available schemes when discussing lending opportunities with customers.

In addition to showing the various loan schemes that are available, the table provides information to businesses about the business payment support service of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. That service provides help by spreading tax payments over a longer period. There is also a trade credit insurance top-up scheme, which is provided by BERR and is designed to help businesses whose credit insurance cover has been reduced by their insurance provider.

It is clear that many businesses are experiencing a short-term reduction in demand for their products and services. That is resulting in companies' finances being squeezed, and it is causing what would otherwise be viable businesses to experience financial difficulties. To help those businesses prepare for the economic upturn when it comes, it is important that the Government provide effective and efficient support. A key element of that support will be to ensure that businesses retain their skills base and enhance that where possible. The scheme that I have announced today will do just that. It will provide crucial and invaluable support to businesses that may otherwise have to make key employees redundant, resulting in the loss of valuable skills and knowledge that would therefore not be readily available when economic recovery occurs. The scheme will save on future recruitment costs when markets improve and will provide the potential for businesses to generate profits arising from the activities of the maintained posts. I commend the statement to the Assembly.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Ms J McCann): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I thank the Minister for her statement.

The Committee has been proactive in looking at the impact of the economic downturn and its effects on businesses here. The Minister's statement is extremely welcome. The support being offered will act as a lifeline to many companies that are dealing with the effects of the credit crunch on a daily basis.

The Minister mentioned criteria for assessing which companies are eligible for short-term aid. Given that the scheme will be introduced next week, will she give details of the specific criteria that will be used by Invest NI to assess the need for support to ensure that all applicants are considered equally? Also, will the Minister provide details of any appeals procedure for

companies that the Invest NI selection panel assess as being ineligible for aid?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I am glad to note that the Committee welcomes the scheme. I am sure that it will be welcomed by many of the businesses throughout Northern Ireland that have indicated that they are dealing with short-term pressures. Those companies feel that they are viable in the long term. They are experiencing short-term difficulties, which are precisely what the scheme has been designed to address.

The short-term aid scheme will run from 1 June 2009 until 31 December 2010. It is open to all companies in the manufacturing and tradeable services sector in Northern Ireland that are in difficulty. The scheme is available to companies that are fundamentally viable and that were not in difficulty prior to 1 July 2008 — that is, their difficulties have been caused by the global economic downturn. They must also meet or have the potential to meet the criteria, which are that they must have total sales of £100,000 a year and have sales outside Northern Ireland that are greater than 25% of their turnover, or, if they are larger firms, the amount of sales should be greater than £250,000 a year. Those are the details of the scheme.

The application forms are clear and simple to complete, which Members will welcome. We do not want to spend a lot of time on bureaucracy during the scheme. Help for companies that are clients of Invest NI and require assistance to complete the forms will be provided by client executives in Invest NI. Companies that are not Invest NI clients and require help to complete the forms will be assisted by business development executives in Invest NI.

Completed forms will be sent to a panel of Invest NI. The panel will consider the application forms and the criteria, as well as the regional economic impact that the loss of those key skills would have in respect of that particular company. The Deputy Chairperson will be pleased to know that that will be taken into account when the applications are assessed. We are also looking at the wider economic impact that those companies have and at the maintenance of key skills for the Northern Ireland economy.

I am happy to write to the Deputy Chairperson with details of how companies can appeal. I hope that there will not be too many appeals, because we hope to help as many companies as possible. There is £50 million available to us, and although the scheme is scheduled to run for a short time we believe that we will have no difficulty in spending the money.

Mr Wells: I am sure that the House will join me in welcoming this innovation. I am delighted to see that Northern Ireland is trailblazing once again as far as the rest of the UK is concerned. That is very welcome.

I wish to raise two issues with the Minister. We all hope that, by the end of December 2010, the recession will be a thing of the past and that companies will have come out of their current difficult positions. Should that not happen, can the innovative scheme be extended so that it can continue to support jobs?

11.00 am

I also want to raise the slightly thorny issue of displacement. One company might receive funding under the scheme while another company might not, which will mean that the latter will lose jobs and the former will keep people in employment. Will the assessment panel examine applications carefully to ensure that we are not robbing Peter to pay Paul with regard to job retention?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: The purpose of the scheme is to maintain key skills that are not readily available elsewhere for the entire Northern Ireland economy. Therefore, we do not see displacement as an issue. We will consider the regional and wider economic impact of awarding money to each company that applies.

Please God, we will not need to extend the scheme beyond 31 December 2010, but, if we did, we would consult the Westminster Government. The scheme has been made possible because the UK Government have provided a £1 billion umbrella scheme and allowed us to develop our own scheme. The Member is absolutely right: as far as I am aware, there is no scheme akin to ours in any of the other devolved regions in the United Kingdom. Therefore, Northern Ireland is leading the way, and we are very pleased about that. We are determined to help our smaller companies, larger companies and micro companies as much as we can and ensure that devolution makes a difference to people in Northern Ireland.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for her welcome statement. The qualifying criteria for the short-term aid scheme suggest that it is geared solely towards INI client companies. Will the Minister assure Members that the scheme will be open to businesses that are not INI client companies?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I specifically said that the scheme was not only for Invest Northern Ireland companies, which is why the criteria are set out as they are. We could easily have said that the scheme would apply only to Invest Northern Ireland client companies, but I was determined that it would not. Furthermore, that is why I said that those who need assistance to complete the application form can go either to their Invest NI client executive or to a business development executive within Invest Northern Ireland who is not attached to any company and will help smaller companies, in particular, to complete the application forms. The

application forms are very simple; there are guidance notes, but, if further help is required, Invest Northern Ireland will provide that.

Mr O'Loan: I welcome the Minister's statement and the scheme that she outlined, which is in line with SDLP proposals. I also welcome the Minister's answer, in which she referred to an easy and supported application process.

The Minister said that a flat rate will be offered, based on company size. Is that not an inflexible way to proceed, and should the scheme not provide support on the basis of the quality of a company's proposal?

The Minister also said that there is not sufficient awareness among businesses of the available schemes. Does she not agree that the real problem is that banks are not making money available to businesses?

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

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I partially welcome the Member's comments; I am reminded that it is election time and that every party is trying to claim responsibility for good policies. The scheme is a good news story for the entire Assembly, and it means that businesses will be assisted when they are most in need so that they can retain their skilled workers.

I accept the Member's comments about flat rates, but the idea behind that is to be as quick as possible in responding to the needs of businesses. We have set ourselves a target of turning application forms around within 20 working days. I want that to be delivered, because people in difficulty need our help as quickly as possible.

I am very much aware that many people are still having difficulties with their banks. We are engaged in ongoing dialogue with the banks, but, as a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, the Member will know that, unfortunately, we do not have any statutory powers over the banks. However, we will continue to push them to be open for business and to provide businesses with access to credit.

I am particularly concerned about the take-up rate for the enterprise finance guarantee scheme in Northern Ireland. I have seen the take-up figures for the rest of the United Kingdom and those for Northern Ireland, and, frankly, a huge disparity exists, for which there must be a reason. I recently wrote to the four main banks that operate the scheme here to ask them for a dialogue about take-up levels. If the scheme is operating in the rest of the UK, why is it not operating in Northern Ireland in any more than a very limited way? That is an issue on which I will continue to press, and I know that the House will want me to do that.

Mr Neeson: I, too, very much welcome the Minister's statement and the co-operation between the Minister

and Sir Reg Empey on the matter. It is a pity that Minister Foster did not make her statement a day earlier, because she would have thwarted her former friend Mr Allister on 'Talkback' yesterday when he said that the European Commission was not doing enough to help businesses.

Does the Minister agree that the success of the scheme very much depends on co-operation between her Department and the Department for Employment and Learning?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: It being a bank holiday yesterday, I was not listening to 'Talkback', but, as Members can imagine, I am sorry that I did not hear that interjection.

My Department and Sir Reg Empey's Department for Employment and Learning have been working very closely on what we can do to help businesses. The Member will know that, directly after this statement, Sir Reg will make a statement on the help that his Department will be offering.

As I said in my statement, the Executive are only too aware of the difficulties that businesses are facing. Indeed, the global economic downturn is a standing agenda item for discussion every week that the Executive meet. That is right and proper, and we will continue to do that.

Mr Newton: I join other Members in welcoming the Minister's statement. I also welcome the fact that she has taken the initiative on the matter. Indeed, in the United Kingdom, we are taking the lead. I have no doubt that business organisations and those whom they represent will welcome the statement. Knowing that the Assembly does care and is prepared to act to support it will give the business sector some confidence.

I welcome the Minister's remarks about reducing red tape and making swift decisions. How long will those swift decisions take to make? I also welcome her saying in her statement that she intends:

"to bring a degree of clarity to the range of financial support that is available to Northern Ireland SMEs and to help them through the difficulties arising from the current economic downturn".

Although a considerable amount of help is available, the clarity that SMEs need in order to obtain that assistance is not there.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I concur with the Member's last point. I do not think that there is clarity about what is available for businesses, small or large. That is why the Department has put together a compendium or matrix that sets out what is available, whether from the European Investment Bank, Invest Northern Ireland or local banks.

Availability is one thing — I refer the Member to my previous answer — but we also need to ensure that there is take-up. I hope that the compendium, which is

available on the Department's website, will be used fully. I am sure that, if they so wish, we will be able to furnish Members with hard copies of the compendium for their constituency offices so that they can have them to hand when businesses come in for advice and assistance, as they do in all constituencies. The Institute of Directors has said that there is no awareness of what help is available to businesses; therefore, it is incumbent on the Government to help fill that communication gap.

In relation to the turnaround of applications, we are committed to giving an answer to companies within 20 working days of receipt of applications. That is a good target, and I will be watching very carefully to see that it is complied with. The last thing that we want to do is add to the bureaucracy and stress faced by those companies.

Mr Hamilton: I join others in welcoming the scheme and, in particular, the fact that it is unique in the United Kingdom. Will the Minister assure the House that there is a requirement for confidentiality in respect of any applications? As she pointed out in her statement, all those businesses are generally good, solvent businesses that are merely experiencing some short-term problems. Does the Minister agree that, if the names of the companies that were applying for the scheme became known, it could do long-term damage to businesses that were merely trying to get through short-term choppy waters and that, therefore, confidentiality is key?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I absolutely agree that confidentiality is key. As the Member said, the aim of the short-term aid scheme is to help companies that are viable in the long term but are having difficulties at the moment. However, if companies became aware that other companies are having difficulties, they may try to take competitive advantage of that. Invest Northern Ireland is well used to dealing with confidentiality issues, and it will continue to do so in respect of the short-term aid scheme.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for her statement, even though she does not accept that there may be a strong correlation between SDLP approaches and her announcement. Nevertheless, I thank her for facilitating that.

The Minister will be aware of the Prime Minister's reply to a question that I asked him last week. Does she agree with him and with me that banks, particularly those that have required Exchequer bail-out, should not be allowed to gratuitously squeeze otherwise viable businesses out of existence, nor should they be allowed to overcharge for their services? What further action can she take to pressurise local banks? She referred earlier to re-establishing trust and with that trust will come renewed cash flow. Anyone who I talk

to about those things feels that there is hardly any point in going near a bank any more because they will not give them money, and, if perchance people are given money, they will be charged twice as much interest as they should be.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I recognise what the Member is talking about in relation to banks, and the First Minister, the deputy First Minister, the Finance Minister and I met each of the banks to press home those very issues. Some of us had a suspicion that the banks, particularly those that have been recapitalised by the Government, are trying to build themselves up again. There is a perception among people who have small businesses, particularly farmers, that they are being targeted because they are easy hits, and they feel very sore about that. I have said it before, and I will say it again: if there are specific instances of banks putting pressure on people, we need to challenge the banks on those.

When we meet the banks, we are told that they are open for business, that they very much want to do business with and lend to the people of Northern Ireland. However, we hear a very different story from our constituents. Therefore, we will continue to talk to the banks, but we do not have any statutory authority over them. As I said, I want to know why we are having difficulties with the enterprise finance guarantee scheme in Northern Ireland. I want to know what the problem is and whether the banks have a difficulty with that scheme. I hope to get to the bottom of that.

11.15 am

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive response and the announcement of a new initiative. That good news for the economy has been welcomed by everyone.

The Minister's statement referred to businesses that are "fundamentally viable" and "not in difficulty" as of 1 July 2008. The Minister will be aware, as will everyone in the Chamber, of businesses that have cut back on their hours and overtime. Some businesses have cut the number of weekly working days to four or even three and reduced their wage bills. I suggest that such businesses are responding to short-term difficulties that are due to the global downturn. Will the Minister assure the House that the assistance that she has announced, in the form of the short-term aid scheme, will be available to those small, medium and large companies, thereby ensuring that they will, as she said in her previous answer, be able to bounce back when the inevitable economic upturn occurs?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I thank the Member for his question. The idea behind the scheme is to help companies that would be flying along now were it not for the global economic downturn and its accompanying pressures. I

pay tribute to large and small companies that are taking the initiative to sustain their businesses. Many employees have had to endure shorter working hours and a reduction in wages. However, they do so in the knowledge and with the hope and expectation that it will be only for the short term. Employees hope that, when the economic upturn happens, their jobs will still be there and the companies will grow again.

The scheme is designed to make the situation easier for employers and employees. It will facilitate the redeployment of skilled people to other areas. The Department has been wide-ranging and flexible about what those people will do during that period. As long as a particular company retains those skills, workers can be redeployed to do almost anything. The scheme was set up to be flexible and assist struggling companies, and I hope that it fulfils those objectives.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Training

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Employment and Learning that he wishes to make a statement on training during the economic downturn.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): As all 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. In the course of only a few months, the economic context that underpins the delivery of all interventions in skills development in Northern Ireland has radically changed. The global recession has been keenly felt across Northern Ireland, resulting in significant job losses in many industries. In addition, an increasing number of companies, particularly in the manufacturing and engineering sector, have ceased production for a set period or moved to three- or four-day working arrangements. Their aim in doing so is to reduce product stockpiles and running costs during the current period of low demand in the marketplace.

Such dramatic economic challenges have brought the skills agenda sharply into focus. To ensure that Northern Ireland is able to make the most of the opportunities that will arise as a result of the eventual economic upturn, we must continue to build on and improve the skills of the workforce. However, during a recession, business training needs change, and apprentices can often be vulnerable. Therefore, I have asked my officials to develop proposals to focus on the needs of apprentices who have been placed on short-time working.

When Apprenticeships NI was launched in September 2008, the Department restated its commitment to 10,000 apprentices being in training at any one time by 2010. By February 2009, that target had been exceeded, with almost 10,300 people undertaking apprenticeships. That represents an increase of 77% over two years.

To protect its existing investment in apprentices, the Department has already put in place procedures to help to protect them from some of the effects of the recession. Contingency arrangements were introduced from 1 December 2008 to ensure that apprentices in the construction, engineering and automotive sectors can complete their training even if they are made redundant. However, more can be done, particularly for apprentices who have been placed on short-time working, which is why I am announcing the introduction of a new scheme to help apprentices on short-time working. Commencing on 8 June, the new Skillsafe scheme will make up to £6 million available for the training of apprentices who are on short-time working. Money for

the scheme will come from my Department's budget and from the European social fund. My Department will work with employers who have placed apprentices on short-time working and with the relevant training organisation to help to fill the apprentices' downtime with accredited training that will contribute to their apprenticeship.

The scheme will pay the apprentice a training allowance to offset the reduction in their pay caused by their being placed on short-time working. The scheme will also contribute to the additional training costs. The programme will begin with the manufacturing/engineering sector, but eligibility for the scheme will be kept under review with the aim of expanding it to other key sectors, subject to demand.

The Department believes the scheme to be an appropriate intervention for several reasons. A modest level of intervention now could save up to three years' investment in the training of apprentices and their work-based mentors. Offering a financial incentive for apprentices will encourage employers to consider retaining them rather than regarding them as an easy target for redundancy. The scheme will encourage the use of downtime for an investment in skills by apprentice and employer. Skillsafe supports the principle of the 'Now is the time' campaign and the Success through Skills strategy to invest in skills and upskilling to strengthen the future economy. It will complement the support provided by Invest NI, as outlined earlier by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The scheme will be available from 8 June and will end once we have recorded two consecutive quarters of neutral or positive growth.

Over the next two weeks, my Department will send information leaflets to all our apprenticeship training providers for distribution to all relevant employers; the leaflets will outline what is on offer and whom to contact. Details will also be available on my Department's website.

In addition, my Department's day-to-day operations involve working closely with employers and businesses. During the present difficult time, we are even more committed to doing what we can to help them to survive the downturn and to prepare for recovery. We have a dedicated team of advisers available to help businesses that want to look at their training requirements and the possible upskilling of non-apprentice staff. That team has a wealth of experience, and eligible companies can arrange for someone to visit their premises to offer advice and assistance. The team works with an organisation to identify and address its training requirements and to provide necessary support on a case-by-case basis.

Although I hope that the Northern Ireland economy will soon see signs of recovery, I have asked my officials to continue to develop other interventions in addition to those announced in the Assembly today. One of

those interventions will target small and medium-sized enterprises in the manufacturing and tradeable services sectors to encourage individuals to train, should they also become subject to short-time working.

Once the required due processes are completed and the required authorisations received, I will make a further statement to the Assembly. Members are aware that this new scheme is being devised in the context of current public expenditure constraints, and they will understand what that may mean.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. It is useful, as it came on the back of the statement made by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. It sends out a clear message that a joined-up approach is being used to tackle some of those issues.

The Minister mentioned the Skillsafe scheme and the issue of the £6 million. He ended his statement by saying that the scheme was devised in the context of current public expenditure constraints. Will that have an impact on the decision about which companies will be offered the scheme? How will the decision be made?

The Minister mentioned paying apprentices a training allowance to help offset reductions in their pay. Will that allowance cover their full losses or only a percentage of them? Are employers expected to meet the remaining training costs? The Minister's last point was about updating the Assembly on other programmes that are in the pipeline. Does he think that those programmes will come on board before the summer recess?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member raised a number of issues. I mentioned public expenditure simply because this programme will operate within our existing budgets, with some help from the ESF. I also mentioned that it is my intention to evaluate whether we need to expand the programme to other sectors, subject to demand. If we do, there will clearly be financial implications.

In addition, I mentioned that I envisaged making a subsequent statement about wider issues, particularly those that concern SMEs. I cannot be precise, but I hope to be in a position to do that within the next few weeks, before the recess. At that stage, we could be talking about significant amounts of money. We will not shy away from spending money because we believe that spending it at this time and on these issues is good value for money. However, much will depend on uptake, and it is clear that we have only a finite amount of money. We will operate within our existing budgets, with a bit of help from ESF. I do not want that to put a dampener on anything; I merely point out that we must bear in mind that there are limits to which we

have to adhere. As far as the offset is concerned, I envisage that we will pay apprentices who are on short time at least minimum wage for the period of downtime, irrespective of their age.

The matters that concern training providers will depend on a number of issues. We will have to negotiate with them because they all have contracts. We may have to examine their capacity to deliver the training and negotiate individually with them, so I cannot be very precise. The objective will be to ensure that the training providers are adequately resourced, but the matter will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. That covers most of the points that the Committee Chairperson raised.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mr Newton): I welcome the Minister's statement. It followed the statement that was made by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and it gives some degree of confidence and comfort to the business sector as a whole and to young people who have faced the problems of redundancy over the past days and months.

This is a welcome scheme. The Minister indicated that it will go out of existence when we witness growth in the economy. How will the effects of the scheme be monitored and reviewed? In the event that it does not produce the results that we desire, how will it be reviewed to ensure that the necessary changes will be made to bring it up to speed and into line?

11.30 am

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I indicated that two consecutive quarters of nil or positive growth would be the cut-off point. The starting point for the scheme is that we wanted to get help in there quickly. We will have information on our website, we are printing leaflets, and our advisers will be aware of the scheme so that they can talk to companies about it.

We do not want to get ourselves too bogged down in bureaucracy. Where we make an investment, a degree of risk is involved, just as a degree of risk is involved in the statement that Minister Foster made, so we could make errors, or an investment may be put in place yet the company does not survive. However, we propose to use existing providers to deliver the training, and those providers are monitored and inspected in the normal course of events. Therefore, it is not our intention to put in place an elaborate structure to monitor that aspect of the scheme, because the Department has the capacity to do so under existing arrangements.

I do not intend to be overcautious. When companies come to us, we will have to make a judgement and an assessment, just as the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will have to do. Where we believe that there is a genuine reduction in hours, with apprentices

being put on short-time working, and if we are satisfied that that is happening in the sector on which we are focusing, we will negotiate an offer of help with the individual training provider that is applicable to that particular company and pay an allowance to the apprentice. We will have to keep an eye on how the scheme is working. We must ensure that the scheme is being adhered to, but existing processes are in place to allow that to happen.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his statement and congratulate him on the initiative.

As all Members are aware, we are in the middle of an unprecedented economic downturn. However, after the downturn will eventually come an upturn, for which we must be prepared. It is, therefore, vital that we build on and improve our skills base. Following his recent visit to the United States, where he visited community colleges, has the Minister identified best practice for improving the training, and consequently the skills, of our young apprentices?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: We have had a relationship with the state of North Carolina, particularly with its community college system, for some time. We have been involved with its community college system for several years. I was pleased that the Committee for Employment and Learning had the opportunity to see for itself last month how that system works. North Carolina uses the community college system, which is the equivalent of our further education sector, as its principal training tool for economic-development purposes.

An interesting point to note is that the community college system works closely with the United States Department of Commerce, which is the equivalent of our Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The lesson learned was that those two sectors work together closely to ensure that the state provides, via its community colleges, the right skills for the companies in that state. That is the link between the two. The creation around the Province of workforce development forums for each further education college to engage with local employers means that we are close to adopting that model in Northern Ireland.

That is the best way of conveying to colleges the type of training that local employers want, because it costs no more to train people for the right jobs than for the wrong ones. It is a good system from which we can learn. The Committee found it interesting, and I believe that the model has potential for Northern Ireland.

Mr O'Loan: I welcome the Minister's statement. I know that he is a reasonable person, and I am sure that he will agree that his proposal is very much in line with proposals that have been published by the SDLP.

Does the Minister agree that the building trades, including the electrical trade, are in need of the scheme?

Many of us are annoyed and disappointed that NIE has said that it will not recruit apprentice electricians in September of this year. Will the Minister update us on discussions that he has had with NIE? Its decision not to recruit apprentices aggrieves many of us, especially given the profits that it draws from every household and business in Northern Ireland.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I want to correct the Member: the SDLP's proposals are in line with my Department's. We were working on the proposals some time before the Member produced his document; I do not know how he got our internal information.

I visited the NIE's training centre and was impressed with what I saw. NIE is a profitable company, and it has a first-class school at its headquarters. I know that my Department has been liaising closely with NIE in recent weeks. Therefore, it is hoped that any reduction in apprentices will be short term. Ultimately, however, it is up to individual companies to provide apprenticeships; we cannot invent them, but we have to encourage companies. I assume that NIE made a commercial decision based on the volume of people whom it has trained already. Furthermore, it is also possible that in the economic recession, fewer people are leaving NIE to move to other jobs.

On visiting NIE, I saw that its apprenticeships are not confined to young people; one apprentice whom I met was over 50 years of age. Perhaps there is hope for all of us.

Ms Lo: I welcome the Minister's statement. His intervention proposals are timely and will bring much needed help to the apprentices who, so often, are the first to be made redundant or to be put on short-time working during difficult economic times.

Plenty of questions have been asked about apprentices, but I am particularly interested in what the Minister said about intervention in SMEs, given the shortage of managerial skills in that sector. Will the Minister target the new intervention at managerial training for SMEs?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As I said earlier, I intend to make another statement when certain due processes are completed.

The proposal that I announced today is consistent with programmes that are running in the Department for Employment and Learning; it is an extension of them. Therefore, the Department was able to make a unilateral decision — without reference to the Department of Finance and Personnel, for instance — because it was consistent with existing programmes.

If we propose interventions that are different from those that we make at present, there is a process in Government through which we have to pass. Furthermore, any interventions that are different from

those that we make at present are more far-reaching. In working out the detail of those interventions, therefore, we must be careful to ensure, as far as possible, that any flaws are kept to a minimum, because people will always find a loophole or there will always be an error.

Therefore, a lot of preparatory work needs to be done, and we must work on that with the Department of Finance and Personnel. The possibility of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I having to bid for additional funding during monitoring rounds must be borne in mind. Once we begin such interventions, it does not take long for large sums of money to start adding up.

On the specific issue of managerial skills, the Member will be aware that my Department has offered companies management and leadership courses that are free at the point of delivery. In fact, demand for those courses has been such that we have had to halt the applications temporarily, because we have had difficulty processing them. However, we will return to that. Interest from companies has been significant already, and that intervention will stand those companies in good stead.

We must remember — perhaps this is a good thing — that many business managers have never had to manage during a recession before. They know how to manage in good times and in periods of growth, but many of them have never had to manage in a downturn. When one thinks about it, people who began their careers in their early 20s would be in their late 30s now and would never have experienced an economic downturn. That explains why there is such interest in, and demand for, management courses.

All the evidence at our disposal suggests that improving management and leadership capability has a direct influence on the ability to improve the competitiveness of the economy. I assure the Member that my Department is very focused on that area.

Mr Easton: I, too, welcome the Minister's announcement; it is good news for businesses and for apprentices in particular. How much of the £6 million funding will come from the European social fund and how much from his Department? Will funding from the Minister's Department be new money, or will it be money that has been taken from other areas?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The money will come from existing departmental budget lines; it is not new money in that sense. I have shifted money around in my budget. The European social fund normally contributes about 40% of the funding. That is the standard rate, and I expect it to be the same in this case. Given that the Budget settlement for the last financial year was the tightest of the three years, we have a wee bit more room for manoeuvre in this new financial year, now that inflation and pressure on pay

rates and so on are much lower. Therefore, we have merely reconfigured existing budget lines slightly to allow for the initiative, and that, together with the European social fund contribution at 40%, is how we propose to fund the scheme.

As I said in my statement, we will look at other sectors as demand arises. Therefore, the proposals apply to one particular sector at what could be the maximum take-up rate. If we were to extend the scheme to other sectors, which we may do in light of circumstances, there would be further pressure on those moneys. Given the present recession, it is important that the Department spends money when it will have the most effect. There is little point in waiting until it is too late. There is little point in allowing apprentices, who may have spent two or three years of their lives trying to get qualifications, to be thrown out with nothing. Therefore, the moneys used will be public money well spent.

My Department has co-operated greatly with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on the initiative. I have had several meetings with representatives of that Department, and our officials are in constant contact. We are trying to take a joined-up approach. We are working closely with Invest NI, which will be able to provide guidance from time to time on the possibility of expanding the scheme to other sectors. We will be very interested to hear Invest NI's contributions at that time.

That is how I propose to fund the scheme at this stage. However, any second proposal that I come back with could be much more expensive.

11.45 am

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister has, in the past, referred to other sectors, particularly the construction industry and the motor vehicle industry, and he referred in his statement to other interventions. Is he considering strengthening the ties between further education colleges and employer engagement, given the important role that further education colleges play in helping small and medium-sized enterprises? Is the Minister assessing the critical sector analysis to see how it can help people into training?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member has reminded me that I omitted to respond to Mr O'Loan when he referred to the construction sector — obviously, his claiming credit for his party threw me at that point. If the sun is still shining, that may also be his party's responsibility. *[Laughter.]*

In reply to both Members, we all know that the construction sector is in severe difficulty. I have made a lot of visits to jobcentres, the most recent of which was to Magherafelt the week before last. Members know that there is a high concentration of people

working in the construction sector in that area. It is a very depressed situation and, in some cases, jobcentres do not have a single job available in the construction sector. As the Member knows, we are reviewing the Construction Industry Training Board, and we are in the middle of a lot of work on this issue.

Mr Butler also asked about SMEs and critical sector analysis. We are guided by all those issues. I anticipate there being interventions to non-apprentices; in other words, interventions at the level of employees who may be faced with short-time working. Such interventions are particularly important given that Northern Ireland's economy mainly involves small businesses. We want to ensure that those interventions will be made not only by Invest NI companies, but by small companies that may not have any connection with Invest NI. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will be taking the same approach.

The construction industry is in a difficult situation, given the fact that there are so few opportunities available. If someone has achieved a construction skill recently, there is normally a period of time before that person is eligible to join a further scheme. However, jobcentre advisers now have greater flexibility, so, for example, if a person has recently been trained in construction, but there are no jobs in that area, that person may be directed to a different area where there is a greater chance of a job being available.

We are trying to be as flexible as possible. The Member is correct: the critical sector analysis will, of course, form part of what we are doing. However, we must remember that we are an economy of very small businesses. We all know that, despite all the talk, if we do not have a meaningful manufacturing or tradeable services sector left at the end of this, we will all be in serious difficulty.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Dr Alasdair McDonnell, who will confirm whether the sun is still shining.

Dr McDonnell: I can confirm that the sun is still shining. Will the Minister expand on his views that the dark clouds are due to parties other than his or mine?

Has the Minister any intention of developing plans or working with the Department of Finance and Personnel to ensure that, within the award of Government building contracts, there is a requirement to employ an agreed percentage of apprentices? I am thinking of something similar to the London proposal to employ 1,000 apprentices on Government building contracts, which is a good idea. Are there any plans at this end to pick up on that?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member is a wee bit ahead of his time, perhaps three hours ahead. He might be asking me that question later today.

The answer is yes. The Minister of Finance and Personnel is heading a group that is looking at the matter, and I am pleased to say that there is progress. In the right circumstances, contracts may contain a condition whereby contractors will be required to employ one apprentice for every £2 million worth of turnover.

People have clearly got the message, and the answer to the Member's question is in the affirmative.

Lord Morrow: I agree that this is a good news story. The SDLP tries to claim all the good news stories going, as though this programme were taken out of the SDLP manifesto. However, I suspect that there is not a word of truth in that.

This is an excellent statement and it has excellent content. However, the Minister has touched on one of the issues that I wanted to raise. The paper deals mostly with those who are in training. However, does the Minister accept that, in the past, apprentices have lost their jobs and were unable to complete their apprenticeships? What can he tell people who are in that position? Will this programme address that issue? Is there any way that the Department can ensure that apprentices who have completed two thirds of their apprenticeships and find themselves out of work will not be disadvantaged?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: On 8 December last year, I announced assistance for apprentices who were faced with losing their jobs in three separate sectors. At that stage, I announced measures, and they have helped. However, they do not cover all sectors; I am prepared to keep that under review.

Today's proposals focus on apprentices who are moving into short-time working. There are provisions for apprentices who are being made redundant, depending on their age. Those aged 16 to 18 can go into colleges — into what might be called a simulated work environment — where they can complete their training. Those who are over 18 can go into mainstream programmes run by the Department, where, I hope, apprenticeships may be completed. However, there are exceptions, and a number of apprentices have been made redundant. I urge them to talk to advisers in the Careers Service. We have expanded the Careers Service. There are 23 new careers staff in the Province who can give appropriate guidance. We are trying to make the system as flexible as possible.

However, there will be those who have fallen through the net. I urge them to talk to the careers advisers who can be found in jobcentres or to look at our departmental website where they will find guidance. That is my advice. The Department will try to be as flexible as possible with those young people.

Mr B McCrea: There is much to praise in the Minister's statement. I will touch on the issue of the sun: those who were here yesterday know that the sun

does not always shine, that the rain comes and dark clouds gather. When that happens, people take shelter in this place. I commend the Minister for offering shelter to those who are suffering as result of the economic travails and downturn.

I ask the Minister to expand on an issue: what is his thinking behind the setting of the allowance to apprentices at the minimum wage rate? The Minister is aware that I have previously raised the issue with him. Is he concerned that some apprentices might have been paid below the minimum wage rate in the past and that that might be to the detriment of future provision?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Some Members have raised that issue on a number of occasions. I have said that we propose to pay all apprentices, irrespective of their age, the full minimum wage rate of £5.73 an hour. That means that even if an apprentice is under 22 years of age, he or she will still receive that rate. I do not propose to apply the rate according to age; rather, a flat rate will apply to all.

The Low Pay Commission is undertaking a review of the minimum wage, and I have commented on that in letters and statements to several Members. We are well aware of the concerns. The minimum wage is a national issue because Whitehall is responsible for determining and enforcing it. I assure the Member that when the review is complete, I will bring it to the House, because I know that many Members have an interest in the issue and have felt that apprentices were exploited in the past.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council

Aquaculture and Marine Sectoral Format

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

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish to make statement, in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998, on the recent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in aquaculture and marine sectoral format. The meeting was held in Carlingford on Thursday 30 April 2009. The Executive were represented by Jeffrey Donaldson and me, and the Irish Government were represented by Eamon Ryan TD, Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, and by Conor Lenihan TD, Minister of State. This statement has been agreed with Jeffrey Donaldson.

The Council welcomed a progress report on the work of the Loughs Agency on the conservation and protection of the fisheries of Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough, which was presented by the chairperson, Mr Tarlach O Crosain, the vice-chairperson, Ms Jacqui McConville, and the chief executive, Mr Derick Anderson.

The Council noted the following points: the impact of the extreme weather conditions that were encountered in 2008 on commercial and recreational fisheries; the agency's continued success in the detection of illegal fishing activity; the collaboration with industry partners in the conservation of marine species in Lough Foyle; the development of partnerships with agencies from both jurisdictions to respond to a major incident in Carlingford Lough; and the successful delivery of the amended Foyle and Carlingford primary legislation in improving the significant voluntary conservation and protection support that angling clubs and associations provide.

Ministers welcomed progress on the agency's application for funding under EU INTERREG IV, for which a letter of offer is now imminent, and on the development projects that the agency's sustainable development programme supports. They also noted the progress made towards the licensing of aquaculture and the introduction of the oyster regulations with the engagement of stakeholders.

Ministers welcomed a presentation from Dr Walter Crozier from the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, and Niall Ó Maoiléidigh from the Marine Institute, on a joint programme of research that the Loughs Agency

commissioned and that Queen's University and the Marine Institute conducted into the genetic population structure of Lough Foyle salmon and the stock composition of the commercial fishery.

I found the presentation fascinating, and it was particularly interesting to hear that the research demonstrated conclusively the positive result of fisheries' management decisions. We were told that the cessation of a significant proportion of commercial salmon netting, for which a hardship scheme was put in place for the fishermen affected, was marked by a drop to zero of the number of non-Foyle salmon caught in the fishery that remains.

Ministers also noted that the science partnerships that were established during that period have played a leading role in the development of a major Europe-wide research project on the use of genetic techniques to identify origins of salmon caught at sea (SALSEA). That was especially significant, and I welcomed the local involvement in the European context in my response to the presentation.

12.00 noon

The council approved the Foyle Area and Carlingford Area (Licensing of Fishing Engines) (Amendment) Regulations 2009, and it also noted plans to bring forward commencement orders. Those orders are required for a staged and managed introduction of the new powers that are available to the Loughs Agency to develop and license aquaculture and to protect the fisheries in the Foyle and Carlingford areas. It also noted that further regulations will require NSMC approval in 2009. It was interesting to hear that although some stakeholders object to any form of regulation, others appreciate the fact that the boundaries and rules are now clear.

The council also discussed the 2009 draft business plan, progress towards the establishment of an unsocial hours allowance, and the salmon hardship scheme. It agreed that its next meeting in the aquaculture and marine sectoral format will take place in July 2009. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): I thank the Minister for her statement. The fisheries policy seems to be to introduce hardship schemes for those in the industry rather than to have a proactive and co-ordinated plan for the development of the sector. The House has heard about the salmon hardship scheme, and the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development will hear later today about the hardship scheme for the beleaguered Northern Ireland fleet.

Will the Minister tell the House how she will ensure that the industry itself does not collapse? Will she further indicate what the Department and the Loughs Agency are doing to ensure that the commercial and

recreational fisheries in Northern Ireland are attractive to those wishing to enter into the industry for the first time and to those outside Northern Ireland who wish to participate in recreational fishing, thereby supporting tourism potential?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The questions and answers today are based primarily on what was discussed at the NSMC meeting, and that particular issue was not discussed. However, I assure the Committee Chairperson that the Department is doing all that it can to continue sustainable fishing in the Foyle and Carlingford areas and at sea. Indeed, I have just returned from the EU Fisheries Council in Brussels where that issue was discussed.

The Department wants to see sustainability in the fishing industry, and any illegal fishing and overfishing will have an impact on that. Therefore, a managed approach is required, and the Loughs Agency is doing excellent work in that area. Such an approach will ensure the sustainability of fishing in those areas as a means for the local population to make a living and as a tourist attraction. The Department works closely with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) on issues that concern both Departments.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for her statement. I would like to concentrate on successes in the detection of illegal fishing. Will she elaborate on the details of illegal fishing and how the detection process is operating? Will she also tell us the levels of detection that there have been?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: At the meeting, representatives of the Loughs Agency reported the increased need for enforcement, and they referred to their knowledge of five poaching crews. They also provided a list of recent seizures, including two extremely high-value cars. Indeed, that type of car is not normally seen in the car park here. By the looks of things, those who are fishing illegally are not short of a bob or two. The agency also receives reports from angling clubs about their river watchers, and that information includes details on some 500 licence checks. Therefore, the Department is keeping a very close eye on the matter to ensure that the actions of those fishing illegally or poaching fish do not militate against our efforts.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for her statement, in which she referred to:

“The development of partnerships with Agencies from both jurisdictions to respond to a major incident in Carlingford Lough.”

What type of incident did the Ministers have in mind when those preparations were being made? Does that reflect on any previous experience of a particular type of incident? Is such work something new, or was it planned?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The exercise was carried out to ensure that we are prepared for any event. In January, the agency hosted a desk exercise on a simulated marine pollution incident in Carlingford Lough that was enthusiastically received by everybody who was involved in it, including the UK Maritime and Coastguard Agency, the Irish Coast Guard, Warrenpoint and Greenore harbour authorities, Louth County Council, the NIEA (Northern Ireland Environment Agency) and Carlingford Lough shellfish fishermen and their representatives. The exercise highlighted the need for a joined-up cross-border approach in the event of a maritime incident. A series of follow-up actions is planned, including a real-time oil-booming exercise and a review of both jurisdictions’ oil-spill response procedures for Carlingford Lough. Such preparatory planning ensures that we will be able to cope with any incident that might arise.

Mr Ford: I, too, thank the Minister for her statement. She referred to a drop to zero in the number of non-Foyle salmon caught in the one remaining salmon fishery at sea. First, what plans are there to remove that last remaining netting arrangement, and secondly, what data exists on the number of salmon that are now entering the Foyle system compared to the period before the nets were removed? It seems that the principal economic benefit will be derived from allowing the maximum number of salmon into rivers for anglers, preferably those from outside Northern Ireland who pay large sums of money to support our local tourist industry.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The figures for 2006 show that non-Foyle fish were caught from the Eskra and Bush rivers, which had not been meeting their conservation targets. Cessation was supposed to help them to comply with the habitats directive. Ongoing fish tagging means that the Rivers Agency will be able to identify where fish come from and where, and if, they return to spawn. We need to work closely with others in order to see where the fish go, whether they come back and, if so, how many come back, so that, based on that information, we can decide which rivers offer sustainable angling and which require further work. Gathering all that data will help us to make the best decision that we can.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her response. She said that she was in Brussels yesterday, and I know that she was there because news reports have already carried the story. Did the Minister discuss, or does she intend to discuss, the regionalisation of the fishing industry? In other words, might we be able to work within the United Kingdom and Ireland in an attempt to retain and promote fishing?

The Minister also mentioned salmon fishing, a subject on which other Members touched. Speaking

not as fisherman but as one who is aware of what fishermen like, the ultimate prize for a fisherman is to catch a salmon. Similarly, for a shooting man, the ultimate prize is to shoot a goose or a red stag. For a fisherman, to get a salmon is to reach the top of the tree. Will the Minister confirm whether the tourism potential of salmon fishing was discussed and how we might take full advantage of it?

The Deputy Speaker: I knew that Mr Shannon would mention shooting at some stage.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I shall indulge him a wee bit — not that I have favourites — and veer off the topic of my statement.

Yesterday, in the discussions in Brussels, we welcomed the fact that there will be less micromanagement by the Commission of the quota and more regional control. Nevertheless, there is much work to do; we still have to engage with industry stakeholders to determine how we might bring forward changes. Although good work has been done, much more must be done in preparation for the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in December.

At the end of the meeting yesterday, I met Joe Borg. I also met my Southern counterpart to discuss how, as an island nation, we can ensure that our fishermen are able to fish sustainably into the future. That meeting was useful.

The Member is right that the goal of a lot of anglers is to catch salmon and other types of fish. We want them to have a fishing experience that they will talk about when they return to their own countries. However, regardless of how much work is done by the Tourist Board, Fáilte Ireland or whoever else, word-of-mouth recommendations are hugely important.

We want all tourists to have worthwhile and valuable experiences. The very good work being done by the Loughs Agency is ensuring that more people who come here to fish for enjoyment are given a good experience and the possibility of catching quality fish. We are always working towards enhancing the fishing experiences of the people who visit.

The Deputy Speaker: Every time the story is told, the salmon gets bigger and bigger.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Yes; and they talk about the one that got away. *[Laughter.]*

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also thank the Minister for her statement. Will she elaborate on the Loughs Agency's proposal for an unsocial hours allowance to be given to river watchers?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Loughs Agency wishes to pay an allowance to its field staff to take account of the unsocial hours that they work, and it is preparing a business case in that regard. Such allowances require the approval of the Finance Ministers, North and South, and the NSMC, but we want to make it happen. We must recognise the good work that is being carried out by the Loughs Agency's staff and reward them for that work accordingly.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Social Security (Lone Parents and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008

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

That the Social Security (Lone Parents and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

The regulations were laid before the Assembly on 1 December 2008. Unemployed single parents are five times more likely to be poor than those who are in jobs. More than one third of children who live in lone-parent households in Northern Ireland are living in poverty and more than a half of the children who live in workless, lone-parent households are living in poverty.

For lone parents, having even a part-time job reduces the likelihood of their child living in poverty to 17%. The figures I quote are taken from the recent Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's report on child poverty. In addition to the financial benefit, paid work provides far-reaching social, health and personal benefits for the lone parent and the children in a household.

The intention behind the regulations is to provide opportunities for paid work to more lone parents and to support them in creating a better standard of living for themselves and their families. The purpose of the regulations is to implement new arrangements for lone parents with older children who claim income support solely on the grounds of being a lone parent. Instead of continuing to receive income support until their youngest child turns 16, parents who are able to undertake paid work may claim jobseeker's allowance when their youngest child reaches 12; by 2010, they will be able to do so when their youngest child reaches the age of seven. With support and assistance, those parents will be required to look for paid work that is appropriate to their individual situation.

To ensure a smooth transition, the changes are being phased in, starting with lone parents of children who are over the age of 12. Lone parents who have a disability or health-related condition that limits their capability to work may be able to claim employment and support allowance. The regulations do not apply to lone parents who are entitled to income support on other grounds, such as those who are in receipt of carer's allowance or those who foster. Lone parents who have a child for whom the middle or highest rate care component or disability living allowance is payable will remain eligible for income support.

To ensure further that that change does not compromise children's welfare, the regulations designate lone parents

as a vulnerable group so that the jobseeker's allowance hardship regime may apply in certain circumstances.

12.15 pm

The regulations also include transitional protection for lone parents who receive income support and are full-time students; lone parents who are undertaking a work-related qualification; lone parents who are undertaking work placements in the Department for Employment and Learning's Steps to Work programme; and lone parents who are on an approved New Deal for lone parents scheme. Lone parents in those categories will remain entitled to income support until their youngest child reaches the age that is in force at the time at which they commence their studies.

To provide opportunities to prepare and support lone parents for the change, the regulations include the introduction of mandatory, quarterly work-focused interviews in the last year in which they are eligible for income support. The changes that are set out in the regulations form part of a package of ongoing welfare reform and are intended to contribute to the strategy to eradicate child poverty.

I appreciate that some claimants face greater barriers in obtaining work than others, especially parents who may face extra challenges because of their children's needs. To recognise that, extra support has been provided to lone parents to assist them to find and keep a job, and to progress once they have settled into employment.

The Department for Employment and Learning provides support to help lone parents to find work through its Steps to Work programme, which offers access to a personal adviser and a range of services. Lone parents have the opportunity to gain a work-related qualification; meaningful and relevant experience of the workplace through quality job placements; assistance with essential skills; and help with developing the skills that are needed to search for work and to sustain employment.

A return-to-work credit of £40 a week is now available to all lone parents in Northern Ireland on their return to work. That can also help to overcome barriers to employment. Lone parents can also access help when they are settling into their job. For example, financial help can be provided through the adviser discretion fund. A payment of up to £300 for the purchase of goods or services may be available to overcome any unexpected financial barriers that might otherwise prevent a lone parent from remaining in paid work.

Tax credits are also available. In December 2008, around 13,700 Northern Ireland families were benefiting from the childcare element of working tax credit. Those families received, on average, childcare support of around £80 a week.

The regulations strike the right balance between providing financial and other assistance to support families and our wider responsibilities to lift individuals, families and children out of poverty. I recognise that lone parents, who do not have the support of a full-time partner, may require extra help to balance their family needs with looking for work. For that reason, the regulations contain additional flexibilities to help and support lone parents who are actively seeking work while often facing challenging personal circumstances.

Most importantly, employers must consider whether it was unreasonable for a lone parent to stay in a job or to take up a job because appropriate, affordable childcare was not available. I fully appreciate the current problems with childcare provision in Northern Ireland. To compensate for that, I have built in an extra flexibility, which is not available in Britain, for lone parents here. Where it is clear from the outset that no suitable childcare is available in an area, the requirement to attend the office fortnightly will be waived, and, instead, the lone parent will be asked to attend only every 13 weeks. I reassure the House that no lone parents in Northern Ireland will be sanctioned if suitable and affordable childcare is not available in their area.

We face challenging times during the current global economic climate. However, it is important that the mistakes of previous slowdowns are not repeated and that people are not allowed to slip into long-term inactivity. That is bad for individuals and their families because it traps them in dependence and poverty.

Northern Ireland's labour market remains dynamic. Many people continue to move between employment, unemployment and inactivity. Job opportunities continue to become available, notwithstanding the economic downturn. The Department for Employment and Learning strives to help people to return to employment as quickly as possible. It provides fast and easy access to thousands of jobs, information, advice and access to necessary skills development. Active labour-market policies such as these regulations will ensure that lone parents do not become further detached from the labour market and are well placed to benefit from current jobs and other opportunities as the economy picks up.

The regulations provide for the right help and support to be available to lone-parent claimants who can work but, often, face challenges to doing so. At the same time, it supports claimants and potential claimants for whom work is not an option in a way that best suits their circumstances. As well as operational safeguards, guidance and training for staff, the additional flexibility to jobseeker's allowance that is contained in the regulations offers protection to the most vulnerable people.

It is not wrong to encourage and support lone parents to find work. Indeed, it is wrong to neglect to do so. I hope that Members will agree that those changes to the regulations are worthwhile and necessary to ensure that, when the children of lone parents are older, those lone parents who are able to work are assisted to seek work with appropriate support.

Ms Purvis: I thank the Minister for taking the time to explain the thinking and intentions behind the regulations and how they are supposed to be applied in practice. I appreciate that they are intended to support reforms in the country's welfare system and to have a positive impact on child poverty by, ideally, increasing lone parents' employment rate. I also understand that the regulations are moving forward now to ensure parity of implementation throughout the UK. However, I have a number of concerns about whether any of those objectives will be achieved.

First, what has happened to the principle of joined-up government? Where is the childcare strategy that is an inherent part of making those changes work? On Monday 20 April 2009, the Assembly debated and passed a motion that called on the Executive to produce a national childcare strategy to address the dearth of accessible, affordable and flexible childcare in the Province. Throughout the debate, each party acknowledged that there is already a shortage of appropriate childcare services to deal with the existing need and that that is particularly the case for older children, who are the ones who will be directly affected by changes in the regulations.

The regulations will create more demand for childcare services. Unlike in England and Wales, where local authorities have a statutory duty to meet childcare needs in their areas, Northern Ireland has no such safety net, no strategy to get there and no Minister who is willing to take the lead in making that happen. Lone parents make up a striking percentage of the number of families who live in, or are at risk of, poverty or are struggling with debt. Efforts to help to move those families towards greater financial health are certainly to be welcomed. However, those regulations appear to ignore the fact that the primary barrier to paid employment for unemployed women is affordable childcare. Without addressing that issue, the regulations run the risk of simply pushing more single-parent families into greater financial stress. If the Minister's argument for bringing forward the regulations is one of parity, why does she not consider full parity that includes provisions for childcare services to be addressed?

Secondly, where are the jobs? We are in the midst of a recession in which there are daily announcements of redundancies and layoffs. Parents with young children already face tough challenges to finding appropriate

employment because the type and number of hours that they can work are restricted.

That is particularly true for lone parents, who often do not have the necessary support networks at home to enable them to work flexible or highly demanding hours. As a result, they tend to find low-paid or low-value work. Therefore, we are pushing those women — I refer to women because more than 95% of lone parents on income support are women — into low-paid work and adding additional and expensive childcare costs to their monthly expenses, and that is assuming that they can find such childcare. That is the real dilemma. Will the legislation move more children out of poverty and away from the risk of poverty, or will it put more families at risk of falling into greater financial stress or, even, poverty?

I appreciate that the Minister has added a few elements of extra flexibility to the implementation of the regulations to protect from sanctions those parents who cannot find childcare. However, it seems to be a highly subjective system. On what information will front line staff base their assessment of whether an area has childcare provision? Will they base it on their own experience? What will happen if they have never been exposed to the availability of services in the area? Although I am certain that the Minister has examined those issues, I ask her to consider whether it is appropriate to delay the introduction of the regulations until those critical matters have been addressed fully.

Ms Lo: I share many of the concerns expressed by Ms Purvis. Given the economic downturn, it is unrealistic to expect lone parents to seek jobs. The lack of a childcare strategy is another major concern. I urge the Minister to talk to the Executive so that they can, as quickly as possible, formulate a childcare strategy that will enable women to access affordable and flexible childcare provision, without which there is no point in telling women to seek work. As the Minister said, it is not wrong to help women to go out and seek work, but we must be realistic.

At the moment, the Department is still playing ping-pong games and shirking its responsibilities in relation to the provision of childcare facilities for school-age children. It is important that the Executive agree who is responsible for that and formulate a strategy to provide women with access to proper childcare provision before they are asked to seek work.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As so often happens, we are told that legislation is progressive, innovative and beneficial. However, in reality, it is punitive to those upon whom it impacts and whom it is designed to help. That is certainly the case with the Social Security (Lone Parents and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations.

Lone parents will have to claim jobseeker's allowance instead of income support. As other Members have asked: where are the jobs at the moment? The legislation currently affects lone parents whose youngest child is aged 12. From October 2009, lone parents with a youngest child aged 10 will be affected, and, from October 2010, the legislation will affect those with a youngest child aged seven.

Interestingly, I dealt with a case last week in which a lone parent, who is also a foster parent, will lose income support because she will be expected to claim either employment and support allowance or jobseeker's allowance. That will impact on her income, and, therefore, she will not be in a position to foster. She takes into foster care the most difficult children on the books of social services. The legislation will not only affect her, but the children to whom she devotes much time and effort.

12.30 pm

There are regional anomalies in the North, particularly with respect to lone parents. As has been mentioned, there is a dearth of childcare provision and no childcare strategy: that must be rectified. Also, for a person to access the childcare element of working tax credit, their child must be cared for by a registered childminder. It is not immediately clear how the regulations will help lone parents and relieve child poverty.

Ms J McCann: Does the Member agree that the regulations will have a disproportionate and potentially negative effect on women in particular, as 87% of lone-parent families are headed by mothers? Does he also agree that in the absence of a childcare strategy and quality affordable childcare more pressure will be placed on vulnerable families both financially and socially?

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for her intervention. I agree that the legislation will be of no benefit to the vast majority of lone parents and will in fact have an adverse effect on them. The legislation highlights the need for us to address those issues in which parity makes the situation worse for people here in comparison with those in Britain. Legislation introduced in England and Wales in 2006 makes it incumbent on local authorities to provide proper childcare. If a gap is identified, it is up to the local authority to fill that gap. That legislation does not apply here.

Issues relating to child poverty will be impacted by the regulations. Lone parents will be forced into a situation in which they have to take jobs that are not necessarily suitable for them, and they will not be able to access the childcare element of working tax credit, thus putting them in an invidious position.

Mr Armstrong: I thank the Minister for bringing the Social Security (Lone Parents and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 to

the Assembly. I welcome the general thrust of the regulations, which is geared towards removing lone parents and children from benefit dependency and poverty. It is crucial that lone parents are given every opportunity to reach their full potential, support their families and get into work.

However, an important issue has been brought to my attention, and it raises wider questions about the way in which parity regulations are approved. In the absence of accessible, affordable and comprehensive childcare provision in Northern Ireland, the positive impact of the regulations may be limited when compared with other areas of the United Kingdom that have comprehensive childcare strategies. What discussions has the Minister had with her Executive colleagues about the creation of a revised childcare strategy, and what impact will the absence of such a strategy have on the implementation of the regulations?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank all the Members who have contributed to the debate: Dawn Purvis, Anna Lo, Mickey Brady and Billy Armstrong. All of the contributions pinpoint the lack of and need for an approach involving a childcare strategy.

When I discussed the regulations in the Executive as far back as December 2008, I highlighted the fact that there was clear absence of a childcare strategy; that I did not have ministerial responsibility for that; and that there were in fact others sitting around that Executive table who did have that ministerial responsibility. It is my understanding that on 18 June there will be a meeting of the ministerial-led group dealing with children and young people. I hope that at that stage we will be able to develop a revised childcare strategy to take on board the various issues that have been raised by Members today, particularly the implications of the economic downturn, of differing employment opportunities and probably the lack, in some rural communities —

Mr F McCann: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister for Social Development: I am responding, but I will give way on this one occasion.

Mr F McCann: I know that the Minister answered questions that were asked by the Committee at one of its meetings. The Minister has stated that a meeting is due to take place, but would it not be better at this stage to suspend any decision until there is a proper childcare strategy?

The Minister for Social Development: I view that simply as an attempt by the Member's party to stall progress. I made the point at the Executive meeting in December that the Sinn Féin Minister with responsibility for the issue had not brought the revised childcare strategy forward.

I will deal with the various issues that have been raised. Dawn Purvis spoke about the lack of childcare provision and asked what would happen if it was not available. Because of Northern Ireland's particular circumstances and the parity issue, I was able to introduce flexible arrangements that mean people, either because of their personal circumstances or the inaccessibility of some rural communities, do not have to go until after the prescribed limit, as is the case in Britain, but only after 13 weeks.

I will provide some detail on the role of personal advisers. Advisers are required to consider the availability and suitability of childcare when they consider whether a parent's childcare responsibilities made it unreasonable for him or her to stay in employment, take up paid employment or to carry out a jobseeker's direction. I take the point that most of the time it is women who find themselves in those situations. I stress that advisers must also consider any necessary childcare expenses where they represent an unreasonable amount of that person's earnings. A lone parent who is also claiming jobseeker's allowance will not be penalised if he or she has just cause for leaving a job or not taking up a job because of their childcare requirements.

I freely acknowledge that there are problems with childcare provision in Northern Ireland. That is why I built in those extra flexibilities, which can be used by advisers in the Department for Employment and Learning and the Social Security Agency. For example, where it is clear from the outset that there is no suitable childcare available in the area, the requirement to attend fortnightly at the jobs and benefits office or social security office will be waived. The job search activity can be confirmed by post until such times as childcare is available. In those circumstances, the customer will only be asked to attend the office every 13 weeks.

I agree with the Members who spoke in the debate: there is a definite need for a proper childcare strategy. I do not have lead ministerial responsibility for such a strategy. As I said at the outset, that responsibility lies with another Minister.

Ms Purvis: I acknowledged that the Minister had introduced certain flexibilities. On what information will advisers make their judgements? Is this not a subjective system in which advisers are left to their own ends to make decisions regarding local availability and affordability of childcare?

The Minister for Social Development: I reassure Ms Purvis that I will insist that personal advisers use the most objective criteria and are sensitive and sympathetic to the people concerned. If Ms Purvis knows of cases that highlight a policy issue or point to a level of insensitivity, she should provide me with the

details so that the matter can be pursued. Notwithstanding that, I want to ensure that the highest level of sensitivity and objectivity is exercised so that due care, attention and sympathy are extended to potential claimants. The majority of those claimants will be women who will have certain requirements that must be recognised.

Dawn Purvis also asked whether these moves trap lone parents in low-paid jobs and simply move them from benefits to in-work poverty. One of the most effective tools available to personal advisers is the better-off calculator, which performs two main functions: it provides advice to customers about the range of benefits that they may be entitled to, and it estimates how much better off the customer could be in work. From today I will ensure that those personal advisers carry out their work in a most objective way.

Dawn Purvis also spoke about the employment position of lone parents. The lone parent employment rate has increased by 4.9% from the same quarter in 2007. Since 1997, it increased significantly by 15.9%, meaning that there were an extra 11,000 lone parents in work. The gap in the overall employment rate increased by more than 12%.

Anna Lo raised similar issues about the childcare strategy. I return to my original point: I do not have ministerial responsibility for that strategy. I raised that point in direct correspondence with my Executive colleagues when I brought the regulations to them for approval.

Mickey Brady raised the issue of foster carers being excluded under the new legislation. The entitlement of a fostering lone parent is not affected by the changes, as he or she is not claiming income support solely on the grounds of being a lone parent. That group has been exempted from the changes, as those lone parents would have greater difficulty in being available for paid work with the extra responsibilities of looking after at-risk children who cannot live with their parents.

Mr Brady: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister for Social Development: I have given way sufficiently. I will address other issues raised by Mr Brady, which may help him.

Mr Brady asked whether we are putting more pressure on parents by wanting them to work and take more responsibility for their children by ensuring that they eat healthily and get more exercise. Growing up in a workless household or in poverty can have a significant negative effect on a child's physical and social development. There is no doubt about that. Research is available to prove that point, but we do not need research to see that; we have ample evidence from our own communities.

I believe that the regulations constitute a balance between providing financial and other support to lone-parent families and our wider responsibilities to lift individuals and children out of poverty. Parental employment can bring benefits to the adults involved through increased self-esteem, extended social networks, a greater sense of control and reduced mental health problems, all resulting in knock-on benefits for children.

Maternal employment in particular can be an important protection against future hardship, notwithstanding the fact that we are in an economic downturn and that finding employment may be difficult, particularly for those in rural areas. That is why childcare strategy must be revised.

Billy Armstrong is absolutely right: there is a need for a childcare strategy. I highlighted that many months ago when I brought regulations to the Executive in December 2008. It is important that that be put in place. I hope that the meeting on 18 June will ensure that that happens.

The regulations ensure that the right help and support will be available for lone parents who want to work but who face demanding challenges in doing so. At the same time, we will ensure that customers who have a limited capacity to work are supported in a way that best suits their circumstances. I believe that, for those who can work, work is the most sustainable route out of poverty for them and their children. Equally, I understand that there may be difficulties and challenges facing people in obtaining employment and in trying to sustain themselves in their own community.

We all know that work is good for people's health and well-being and that it raises self-esteem and prospects for all families. Paid work promotes choice and independence and on a wider scale supports our society and increases community cohesion. No lone parent — I emphasise that point — in Northern Ireland will be sanctioned if suitable and affordable childcare is not available in their area. That is notwithstanding the fact that there should be a proper childcare strategy in place. We know where the responsibility for that lies.

12.45 pm

I thank all Members who contributed to the debate for the interest that they have shown in the regulations. If Members hear of particular difficulties in the outworking of the regulations, through either constituency representations or contact that they have with people who are subject to the regulations, they should relay them to me so that they can be examined in the context of the policy and form part of a suitable submission to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. That is important, because, as I said, the regulations are a piece of parity legislation on which I

was able to exert a degree of influence. The parity nature of the legislation means that final responsibility for it lies at Whitehall and Westminster. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put.

The Assembly divided.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Due to an error in the appointment of Tellers, we have to stop the vote and rerun it. The Tellers for the Ayes are Mr Burns and Mrs Hanna, and the Tellers for the Noes are Mr Brady and Mr Fra McCann.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 48; Noes 17.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Burns, Mr Campbell, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mrs Hanna, Mr Hilditch, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McFarland, Mr McNarry, Lord Morrow, Mr Newton, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Burns and Mrs Hanna.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Purvis, Ms S Ramsey.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Brady and Mr F McCann.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Social Security (Lone Parents and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately on the lunchtime suspension. I propose therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 1.03 pm.

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

2.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Educational Underachievement

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

Mr B McCrea: I beg to move

That this Assembly urges the Minister of Education to put in place more efficient, targeted measures to deal with educational underachievement rather than relying on the mechanism of free school meal entitlement.

One sometimes wonders where to begin on an issue as complicated as education. Many factors affect the future well-being of our young people and country, but few are more basic than numeracy and literacy skills, which our young people need in order to move forward. All sides accept that those who come from more socially deprived areas, particularly areas of multiple deprivation, face a number of additional challenges. We must try to find a way to support them.

However, my party and I are concerned that we have not yet found a proper way of identifying those people. How do we target resources correctly? The motion was tabled after a discussion in the Education Committee. The 'Every School a Good School' policy document states that a substantial body of research confirms the correlation between social disadvantage and educational performance. It goes on to say that free school meal entitlement is regarded as the best indicator yet of social disadvantage in our schools.

However, the conundrum is then posed by the statement that many schools with exactly the same level of free school meal entitlement or exactly the same level of social deprivation achieve hugely different performance outcomes. That must suggest that although entitlement to free school meals is important, it is not the sole or best indicator in that regard. Other areas must be considered to establish how intervention should be targeted.

The 'Every School a Good School' policy document goes on to explain why free schools meals are used as a measurement in transfer 2010, which the Minister has presented for consultation as though it is a panacea for our problems. However, even the report that brings the matter forward clearly identifies that free school meal entitlement appears to advantage certain sections of the community and disadvantage others. Its own analysis sets out that there is a difference between the cohorts, which clearly indicates that there is a problem with analysis in that area. Nobody is suggesting that we should not try to target intervention at those who need it most. We are saying that the selection of a clearly unequal criterion that is not working compounds and reinforces inequality rather than addresses it.

I note that two amendments to the motion have been tabled. That is to be welcomed. Nevertheless, given the discussions that were held beforehand, I am a little confused about the arguments that are being put forward. I fully accept and understand the amendment tabled by the DUP. It contains points that were discussed in detail in the Education Committee. I agree that the amendment refers not to a matter of opinion but to one of fact, consideration of which has previously led me to issue a challenge to the Minister of Education — and I did that very dangerous thing for all politicians: I said, on air, that I was not sure what to do next.

That is a statement from which I will not resile because there is a problem in our education system and there appears to be no way of tackling it. I am quite happy for somebody to correct me on this because I am not exactly sure of the details, but I am led to believe that the important topic of animal welfare has been discussed 10 times by the Executive. I do not understand why that is the case, but education has not yet managed to make it onto the Executive's agenda. Is there anything that is more important for our people than sorting out the education debate?

Many parents come to me and ask whether anything will be sorted out. Although I would welcome being contradicted about this, I fear that the answer is that we have decided that education is too difficult for us to sort out. It seems that we have decided to leave that issue alone and deal with something that is a little more commensurate with our abilities. The people of Northern Ireland will not understand that.

I believe that Sinn Féin may be prepared to support the DUP amendment, which is only an addition to our motion. I do not understand that; it is fundamentally incorrect to rely on free school meal entitlement because it clearly differentiates and discriminates against certain folk. In this case, it is the political people —

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I will if the Member is short.

Mr O'Dowd: I am not short. *[Laughter.]*

On a number of occasions during his speech, the Member indicated that free school meal entitlement is an unequal measure. Will he explain how he has come to that conclusion, given that school meal entitlement is calculated on the basis of household incomes?

Mr B McCrea: Despite the fact that the Member is not short, I am glad that he intervened. There are three or four matters that lead me to that conclusion, which is what this debate is all about.

Education maintenance allowance (EMA) is awarded using similar criteria to those used for free school meal entitlement. I have a list that indicates that one school had a 3.47% take-up of free school meals and a 32.8% take-up of education maintenance allowance. Another school had a 3.23% take-up of free school meals and a 29% take-up of education maintenance allowance. If the criteria are based on the same principle of encouraging people to come forward, why is there a disparity?

That disparity continues right through the different sectors. Those particular figures happen to be taken from the controlled grammar school sector but I have other figures in front of me also. If the Minister is so keen to encourage people from lower-income backgrounds to come forward, why does she discriminate against good schools, such as controlled grammar schools? The free school meal entitlements for controlled grammar schools are below 5% yet, when it comes to sixth form, those schools bring people forward in the very way that we want.

I also refer Mr O'Dowd to the conclusions of, and questions from, the equality impact assessment of the transfer 2010 guidance. The free school meal criterion is shown to advantage Catholic children as, although only 50% of children who are in P6 are Catholic, of those who receive free school meals, 62% are Catholic. Is the Member saying that children in the Protestant sectors are better off than children from the Catholic tradition? I do not think that that is the case. All the educational underachievement figures that are contained in the PricewaterhouseCoopers report indicate that the fundamental problem is in Protestant working-class schools. That report categorically states that the criterion of free school meal entitlement goes the wrong way, and that is why it is not the answer.

The third thing that I will say to destroy the Member's assertion is that there is a marked difference in the performances of schools that have pupils from similar backgrounds, that are based in areas with similar levels of social deprivation and in which there are similar levels of free school meal uptake. Therefore, free school meal entitlement is not a reliable indicator. The fact that we try to build the entire way forward for our educational debate by using that criterion is

shameful. It will perpetuate social inequality; it will not deal with the problem.

Whenever we discuss how we can have a reasoned debate, I have to say — and I was trying to develop this point — that I do not know how to get the Minister of Education to listen to reason. Nobody is saying that we should not try to tackle certain issues in our society or that there are not areas where we could do better. We are saying that where the system is working, surely we should maintain it. Where there are lessons to be learned, surely we should learn them. Where there are facts, evidence and reports that contradict statements that are being made, surely we should listen to those rather than get on an ideological tub and start thumping and saying “it is my way or no way”. That is not the way forward for this type of society.

We want to address genuine and serious issues, but there also are many success stories to discuss.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr B McCrea: Other Members will talk about the great successes that there have been in the model schools in Belfast. The Ulster Unionist Party is committed wholeheartedly to supporting those who need help, but we will not support a clearly discriminatory policy. We call on the Minister to think again.

Mrs O'Neill: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“recognises the relationship between educational underachievement and social deprivation and that the use of free school meal entitlement is a robust indicator of children from low income households; further recognises that educational underachievement is caused by a range of social and economic factors; and urges all the Executive Departments to tackle these factors in a joined up way.”

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I should say at the outset that Sinn Féin will accept the DUP's amendment, provided that our own is passed. However, I make it clear that in no way will we accept the UUP's conservative motion. I thought that the motion was about educational underachievement; however, it is obvious that the Member who moved it lost his way and could not articulate that point.

We have debated educational underachievement no less than twice in the past number of months. The evidence is clear, and we have all referred to it time and again. The facts are before us. There is a correlation, which is recognised across the world, between social disadvantage and educational outcomes. In the North, 27% of pupils who are entitled to free school meals achieve five good GCSE grades A to C, whereas 60% of those who are not entitled to free school meals achieve those grades. That is more than double the figure for pupils who are entitled to free school meals.

Since coming into office, the Minister has recognised the need to urgently address educational

inequalities. She has taken forward a number of high-level policies that will tackle underachievement and inequality, including the revised school improvement policy, the early years strategy, the literacy and numeracy strategy, and the special educational needs review.

Mr McCrea claims that using the free school meal entitlement as an indicator is a blunt and unreliable device, but evidence to the contrary exists. The Committee for Education was given a briefing from departmental officials last week. A lot of information supports the fact that the free school meal entitlement has long been recognised as a good proxy of many aspects of social deprivation and that it is a robust indicator of deprivation in its own right. It is a good measure of disadvantage; the evidence shows that clearly. Mr McCrea mentioned transfer 2010; however, the Equality Commission's response to that considered the free schools meals entitlement to be an appropriate proxy for poverty and social deprivation. That is very clear for us all to see.

There are a number of reasons why the entitlement is used as a measure. First, it is highly correlated with the multiple deprivation measure. Secondly, it relates to individuals, meaning that it is a more robust method than assuming that everyone in an area is the same. Thirdly, it is current. Fourthly, it is readily available for us to use as part of the census return. Even with the evidence base for using free school meal entitlement as an indicator, it is not the only measure that the Department uses. The Minister can, perhaps, tell us more about that in her response.

Mr McCrea referred to some variation between schools. That is to be expected even when allowances are made for socio-economic status. However, even between schools that have similar levels of disadvantage, the difference in the number of pupils reaching the expected level in literacy and numeracy at Key Stage 2 in primary schools that have above-average free school meal entitlement can be as much as 60 percentage points. At Key Stage 3, the difference can be as much as 40 percentage points. At GCSE level, in schools where 50% and more of pupils are entitled to free school meals, the variation in the proportion of pupils achieving grades A to C is around 20 to 30 percentage points. Those are facts that the Minister of Education has chosen not to ignore. As I said, policies and systems are in place that will work to achieve equality in the education system.

That work aims to ensure the success of every child, regardless of his or her background, gender, sexual orientation or race and regardless of whether he or she has a disability or comes from the Travelling community. All schools should be safe havens to which children can go to learn and to be encouraged and supported to achieve their potential.

2.15 pm

The education system across the North performs well at the highest levels, but it does not compare well in an international context. Too many young people are not achieving the educational outcomes that should be the norm on completion of 12 years of compulsory education, and we need to be more effective in raising standards overall and, particularly, in reducing the levels of underachievement. As I said already, the Minister has set in train a number of measures that will do that from within the Department of Education, and she has also signed up to a number of public service agreement targets, in conjunction with Departments such as DEL, Health and DSD. We need to support and enhance that work, and we must ensure that all our children — not only the chosen few — reach their potential. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Storey: I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert

“; and notes the issue of underachievement of boys, and specifically boys from deprived Protestant areas, as identified by reports commissioned by NISRA into the literacy and numeracy of pupils; and calls on the Minister of Education to outline what action her Department is taking to address this specific problem.”

I support the Ulster Unionist Party's motion, if amended by the DUP amendment. The amendment expands on the Ulster Unionist Party's motion. Some time ago, the Committee for Education received evidence that Protestant boys, in particular, were suffering as a result of underachievement. The NISRA research publication, 'Literacy and Numeracy of Pupils in Northern Ireland', indicated that there were a number of factors around the issue of underachievement.

In the course of the debate, no one in the House will try to somehow mask the fact that there is a problem. However, they can try to avoid the problem — to duck and dive. I will respond to some of Mrs O'Neill's comments in a moment to prove that if one continues to say the same thing, there is always the risk that people will begin to believe one's propaganda.

I remind Members that we are dealing with underachievement, and we are seeking mechanisms and methods to deal with that problem. Why are some pupils underachieving? The NISRA report says that there is:

“A lack of parental involvement in their children's education”.

We have to send out a challenge to parents. I speak as a parent who, sometimes, struggles with his 16-year-old daughter's homework, because it has advanced so much from the days when I was at school. We have to ensure that we continue to engage with our children and that we know what is taking place in schools.

The report states that there is:

“A perceived lack of value placed on education in certain areas, particularly deprived Protestant areas”.

I am glad that, for once, a document has been produced that is unashamed in its use of the word “Protestant”. There is a culture emerging in Northern Ireland in which one has to almost whisper the word. I am not ashamed to use the word; I am proud of my Protestant heritage and Protestant culture. Here we have Government statistics and analysis that says that there is a problem in deprived Protestant areas.

The Minister comes to the House and lectures us. In her monotone, she tells us how she is concerned about the children. Then she tells me and my colleagues on this side of the House that we are failing the Protestant community. Now we have evidence: Government statistics showing that there is a problem in the Protestant community. What has the Minister done about that? As usual, there is no eye contact, no response, no answers, no solutions — only rhetoric.

The NISRA report also mentions:

“a shortage of positive role models”,

and gives a list of factors that affect underachievement, such as:

“A decline in the readiness for schooling of pupils entering primary school”.

Then it says:

“One of the issues identified by the NIAO and PAC reports was the underperformance of boys, and, specifically, boys from deprived Protestant areas, compared to girls in Northern Ireland.”

The question that must be asked is: what is the Minister doing? Among the raft of paperwork that comes to the Committee for Education — I do not know how many trees were cut down to produce all the documents — I have not seen one report from her Department, excluding independent analyses from NISRA or the Public Accounts Committee, that has stated that such a problem exists in the Protestant community.

Yes, the terms “Irish medium” and “Travelling community” are used. Let me repeat, just in case it creates an issue, that I have no problem with making provision for the Travelling community. I have no problem with making provision where it can clearly be seen that demand for Irish-medium education exists. Remember that we spend £20 million a year on that sector, which, according to the Education and Training Inspectorate's 'Chief Inspector's Report 2006-2008', is beginning to slow down. That sector is not as progressive as we were told it was. However, in case I am accused of fundamentalism, of which I was accused a few weeks ago, or sectarianism or racism, let me state that that is not what we are about and put that accusation to bed.

None of the documents that come from the Minister's Department states that there is a problem in the working-class Protestant community. Therefore, Minister, in the House today, can you unequivocally —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Minister — sorry, the Member, although he may be a Minister in future — to speak through the Chair, please.

Mr Storey: Through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I ask the Minister, when she responds to the debate, to tell us clearly, without fudge or prevarication, what she has done. Let us not hear about 'Every School a Good School' or about numeracy and literacy policy, because neither of those policies refers to boys' underachievement, particularly Protestant working-class boys.

The proposer of amendment No 1, Mrs O'Neill, said that our school system does not perform well internationally and that, in that context, we are really very poor. I remind the Member of the briefing note 'Comparisons of Educational Attainment' that the Assembly's Research and Library Service compiled on behalf of the Committee for Education, of which she is a member. The note is not DUP propaganda, nor was it written by a hybrid of strands of unionism ganging up on the Minister, but is independent analysis that states:

"With significant differences between jurisdictions with respect to the types of qualifications obtainable, any comparative assessment of educational attainment performance presents challenges."

That quotation clearly states that problems present when comparing figures.

Members should note what the briefing note goes on to say about what the programme for international student assessment (PISA) said about Northern Ireland. We are always being told how PISA is a great system. We ignored the trends in international mathematics and science study (TIMSS), because it would have cost us £400,000, although that would have provided a more accurate measure of deprivation and its associated problems. However, according to the briefing paper, PISA's report shows:

"Northern Ireland's performance is broadly in line with rest of the UK and outperforms OECD average in science"

and in other areas. Therefore, to try to present to the House the argument that we are not performing internationally is not to be accurate with the figures.

We can bandy figures back and forth across the Chamber and debate statistics, but, in today's debate, we are throwing down a challenge to the Minister. I will repeat that challenge: can she provide evidence that she has taken on board the arguments and the statistical data that state clearly and unequivocally that there is a problem in that Protestant boys are underachieving? What is she doing about that?

Remember that she is the Minister for all the children. She tells us that she is concerned about all our children. Today, she has an opportunity to prove to the House that she has done something specific.

I shall now deal with the issue of free school meals.

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

Mr Storey: I have one minute left of my allotted 10 minutes. If someone were to intervene, I would be able to squeeze another minute out of my speech.

What is the Minister doing to encourage the Protestant community to take up free school meals? It is clear that in that community, a stigma is still attached to claiming free school meals. Mr Basil McCrea mentioned the EMA, and there is no stigma attached to claiming that. One reason is probably because it is not seen as such an issue, whereas in our community, there is still a problem with getting our people to apply for free school meals.

We will work with our community to deliver on that, but what is the Minister doing to encourage people to take up free school meals? She has done absolutely nothing. However, even if she were to do something, it would still not be a fair and accurate way of making sure that an objective monitor can be put in place to discover the underlying reason for underachievement in our schools.

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

Mr Storey: I support amendment No 2.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time will commence at 2.30 pm, I suggest that Members take their ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to be called to speak will be Mr Dominic Bradley.

The debate stood suspended.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Childcare

1. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of Education what action has been taken, to date, by her Department to clarify departmental responsibility for school-age childcare. (AQO 2771/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Tá roinnt Ranna freagrach as cúram leanaí i dTuaisceart na hÉireann. Childcare is a responsibility shared between a number of Departments in the North of Ireland.

Access to good, affordable childcare is an important element in achieving a range of Government objectives, including helping parents to move into work, training or education or to increase their working hours if they wish. It also plays an important role in extending choice for women, and high-quality provision can have a positive impact on children's educational and health outcomes. The needs of children and parents and the range of services are dependent on the age of children and the appropriateness and quality of care, and go beyond school-aged childcare alone.

In recognition of the cross-cutting nature of childcare, my Department has contributed to a working group led by officials in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) as part of the subgroup on poverty, which is one of the six key priority themes identified by the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. That working group has prepared a paper scoping out the issues and needs for childcare and is examining future options for the provision of childcare. The paper will be discussed by the relevant Departments on 18 June, following the meeting of the Executive.

Mrs Long: I do not think that anyone would disagree with the importance that is put on childcare generally. However, the issue of school-age childcare is particular in that there has been a dispute rumbling between the Departments of Health and Education as to who is responsible. I am seeking an assurance that the Department of Education is proactively seeking a solution. As the Minister said, it is critical to lifting families out of poverty.

The Minister of Education: I absolutely agree that high-quality childcare is important. It is a shared policy between three Departments: the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the Department of Education. OFMDFM is leading a working group on the matter, and there will be a meeting on 18 June.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome what the Minister has said. Does she expect to see a new childcare strategy for the North on the back of that working group?

The Minister of Education: Beidh ionadaithe ón Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí, ón Roinn Fostaíochta agus Foghlama, ón Roinn Fiontair, Trádála agus Infheistíochta, ón Roinn Talmhaíochta agus Forbartha Tuaithe, ón Roinn Forbartha Sóisialta, ó Oifig Thuaisceart na hÉireann, mar aon le hionadaithe ón Roinn Oideachais ag freastal ar chruinniú ar 18 Meitheamh leis an bpáipéar ar chúram leanaí a phlé.

DHSSPS, DEL, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the NIO, along with the Department of Education, have been invited to attend a meeting on 18 June to discuss the paper on childcare emerging from work under the auspices of the subgroup on child poverty. That meeting will assist Departments in shaping their next steps.

Mr B McCrea: When the Minister is considering all of those issues for childcare and a review of the overlapping issues, will she give us an indication of when she expects to report on the workforce review in schools, which she gave a commitment to do in 2007 to the classroom assistants, who play a valuable role in the care of our children?

The Minister of Education: Today, the focus is on the childcare strategy. There will be a meeting on 18 June at which we will bring forward proposals.

Community Relations: Funding

2. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister of Education what interim arrangements are being proposed by her Department to sustain funding beyond 2009 for the community groups funded by her Department's community relations core funding scheme.

(AQO 2772/09)

The Minister of Education: Chreid mé le fada go raibh an beartas um chaidreamh pobail ró-chúng, agus tá mé iontach sásta go bhfuiltear anois ag dul i ngleic leis an ngné seo tríd an athbhreithniú.

I have long held the view that the community relations policy has been too narrowly defined, and I welcome the fact that that dimension has been explored through the review. Work on the revised community relations policy is well advanced and will be brought forward in due course. I will consider any funding issues within the context of the revised policy. The scope of the review of policy includes enshrining equality and good relations as core principles, and addressing section 75, which places a statutory duty on public bodies in carrying out their various functions to have due regard to promoting equality.

The scope of the review also includes taking into account the views of persons from each of the nine groups listed in section 75 and focusing on the wider concepts of diversity and issues affecting the two main traditions. Under section 75, public authorities are also required to:

“have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.”

Mrs M Bradley: Is the Minister aware that staff are now being put on notice and that schools are being informed that their respective education and library boards have no money for the schools' community relations programme? Will she tell the House why there has been a deafening silence from her Department?

The Minister of Education: The current method of funding community relations programmes was to end on 31 March 2009. However, as community relations continue to be addressed by schools and youth groups throughout the summer months, funding was extended until August 2009. All organisations currently in receipt of community relations funding, including the 26 core-funded groups, have been advised of the extension and that the outcome of the review may impact on the level of funding available. It is essential that our community relations policy reflects our section 75 duties and the diversity of groups across the range of section 75 groups. I hope that the Member is not suggesting that we leave out any group included in section 75.

Mr Shannon: My concern, and that of many other Members, is for the continuity of funding for community relations groups. Lack of continuity has an adverse effect on staff and on the impact of the programmes that they carry out. Will the Minister confirm that, as her ministerial responsibility and her promise to people involved in those groups implies, she will ensure continuity of funding so that the good programme of work that they do will continue?

The Minister of Education: I have already answered that question. The Department informed all organisations of the review well in advance, and it informed them of the review's implications. It has

given an extension to the community relations programme. That was meant to end in April but, because of summer activities, we have extended it to August 2009.

Teacher Redundancies

3. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Education how many teachers are being made compulsorily redundant this year. (AQO 2773/09)

The Minister of Education: Discussions are ongoing between employing authorities with a view to securing volunteers for redundancy and the redeployment of teachers in redundant posts where appropriate. It is therefore not yet possible to identify the number of compulsory redundancies, if any, that there will be in 2009.

I am informed, however, that employing authorities do not anticipate any increase in the number of teacher redundancies in 2009, and I am pleased to report that the number of teacher redundancies in schools has fallen significantly over the last two years as a result of ongoing reform of the arrangements for compensating teachers for redundancy and premature retirement.

An eight-week consultation on the draft Teachers' (Compensation for Redundancy and Premature Retirement) Regulations 2009, and on equality screening of the draft regulations, closed on 15 May 2009. The Department is currently analysing all the responses to that consultation. When the analysis is complete, a summary of responses and a revised equality screening will be published on the Department's website. At that point, I will consider the outcome and review any equality duties in relation to the matter.

Mrs D Kelly: Naturally, I am disappointed, though not surprised, that the Minister did not answer the question.

Is it not the case that the budget that schools and employing authorities have at their disposal, as well as school numbers, will, in some part, determine the number of compulsory redundancies? Does the Minister concede that her proposals on teacher redundancies will have a disproportionate and detrimental impact on young female teachers, many of whom are in their first teaching post? Does she further concede that the proposals should have been equality screened and impact assessed before they were put out for public consultation?

The Minister of Education: I answered the Member's question, and I will now answer her numerous supplementary questions. The proposal has been the subject of a consultation exercise, and the responses are being studied. I hope that the Member is not suggesting that I pre-empt that work. An extra £6

million to give to the employing authorities has been found, and I hope that the Member is pleased about that. The proposal has been equality screened; however, I will review the proposal, if the responses to the consultation suggest that there is a need to do so.

Mr Easton: Does the Minister agree that it is an absolute disgrace that only in the past two to three months has the South Eastern Education and Library Board made contact with teachers at Donaghadee High School about redundancies and teacher placements elsewhere? Does she also agree that it is totally unacceptable that those teachers found out about that only two or three months before the school's closure?

The Minister of Education: Rather than comment on a particular school, I will respond to the Member in writing.

Mr K Robinson: Given the annual cull of teachers, many of whom are based in schools that are located in areas of high disadvantage and that already have too many composite classes, will the Minister indicate her estimation of the impact of that ongoing cull of highly skilled teachers?

The Minister of Education: It is interesting to hear the Members opposite say that they support the secondary school sector, and I welcome the fact that they support it. However, I ask that they reflect on the reason why a disproportionate number of secondary schoolteachers are suffering redundancies. In case some Members do not understand why that is happening, let me explain the situation again: the amount of money that a school gets is based on the number of children taught there; and the number of teachers that a school can employ is based on the number of children at that school. In our classrooms, there are 50,000 empty desks. Which schools are bearing the brunt of those 50,000 empty desks? It is the secondary schools. Yet, Members of the two parties opposite fail to support secondary schools and fail to support change in the system. Thankfully, — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

The Minister of Education: Thankfully, my party stands by the pledges that it made. We stand by our pledge to reform the education system in order to make it fair. Here we have crocodile tears — *[Interruption.]* Members are reacting because they know what is happening. They know that the current system disadvantages our secondary schools, which have the greatest number of children receiving free school meals, the greatest number of children with special needs and the greatest number of empty desks. That is the case because grammar schools accepted pupils who got a grade A in their 11-plus first, then the pupils who got a grade B, then those who got a grade C, and then those who got a grade D. Thankfully, the 11-plus is gone. No more — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: No more will children be discriminated against in that way.

Lagan College

4. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Education to outline why there is a delay in reaching a decision on rebuilding premises at Lagan College. (AQO 2774/09)

The Minister of Education: Ó rinneadh Aire díom, chuir mé in iúl an imní atá orm faoi úsáid comhpháirtíochtaí príobháideacha poiblí i scoileanna. Since coming to office, I have opposed the use of public-private partnerships in schools. I have not approved any new school PPP projects since taking up office.

The Lagan College/Tor Bank Special School project was one of a number of legacy PPP projects already in procurement when I was appointed. Remaining issues must be resolved before a preferred bidder can be appointed for the building project to extend and refurbish Lagan College. As a preferred bidder has not yet been appointed, the specific issues remain commercial in confidence. My Department is liaising closely with representatives of the project board to ensure that all issues are addressed as a matter of urgency.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her response. Will she confirm that the project is definitely going ahead, given that a promise was made to the school seven years ago?

2.45 pm

The Minister of Education: Tor Bank School and Lagan College require, and will receive, new school buildings. However, there are issues that need to be resolved.

Mrs Hanna: Will the Minister tell the House how many capital projects have fallen behind their target start dates? Does she have plans to ensure prompt delivery of those projects?

The Minister of Education: My Department currently has more money than it has ever had to spend on capital projects. We must ensure that that money is spent wisely and carefully and that we rebuild our schools estate.

I will write to the Member to answer her detailed question. I am delighted that so many new school builds are in place. Members may be pleased to note that, last year, for the first time in a long time, there was no underspend in the Department's capital spend. That happened because I placed a huge emphasis on ensuring that that budget was spent.

Special Educational Needs Review

5. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister of Education to confirm if the SEN (special educational needs) review has been submitted again to the Executive Committee for approval to go out for public consultation.

(AQO 2775/09)

8. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Education what risk exists to the £25 million, secured through the Programme for Government and Budget for implementation of the policy proposals of the SEN review, if implementation of the review is further delayed.

(AQO 2778/09)

15. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Education when the results of the special needs review will be published; and when additional funding will be released for this area of education.

(AQO 2785/09)

The Minister of Education: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 5, 8 and 15 together.

Le breis agus 60,000 — 18·6% — páiste agus duine óg a bhfuil riachtanais speisialta oideachais acu agus le 13,210 — 4·1% — a bhfuil ráiteas acu, ní féidir neamhaird a dhéanamh a thábhachtaí atá riachtanais speisialta oideachais don chóras oideachais go ginearálta.

Everyone accepts that more must be done to ensure that the 60,000 children with special educational needs — some 18·6% of our children — are given the opportunity to achieve during their time at school. Unfortunately, although many Members talk about the need to provide more effective support for those children, their will to deliver does not seem to be as strong as their rhetoric.

Despite the fact that a document on the review of special educational needs and inclusion was first referred to the Executive in July 2008, I have been unable to progress the proposals arising from that review as planned. That is due to the lack of an Executive agreement to issue those proposals for public consultation. On 8 May 2009, I resubmitted the policy proposals to the Executive for the third time and again recommended that the Executive agree to issue the proposals for public consultation as soon as possible. Once again, my request appears to have fallen on deaf ears. Almost 11 months on from the original referral, and despite the Assembly's supporting last week's motion to issue that document, I regret to report that, unbelievably, the consultation document did not make it onto the Executive agenda on Thursday 21 May. Parents of children with special needs have questions, which they need to ask the party opposite.

This year, I made £750,000 available to bring forward a range of initiatives that support many aspects of the policy proposals that do not require legislative change. The shift in timescales caused by the delay means that

I may not be able to commence implementation of the full package of proposals in 2010 and 2011, but I plan to use £24 million for capacity-building programmes to enhance the current provision.

I thank all the other Assembly parties for supporting last week's motion; only one party voted against it. Those programmes will help to ensure that our educational system can provide an effective continuum of support for the continuum of need in our schools.

The policy proposals that emerged from the review relate to the most vulnerable individuals in our society. The public consultation is much anticipated by all those who are involved in the extensive pre-consultation stage, particularly those parents who have experienced difficulties with the current framework and who remain frustrated that they are being prevented from giving their opinion on the proposals. It is my firm hope that my Executive colleagues will now agree, at the earliest opportunity, to issue the policy proposals for consultation. Any further delay will result in difficulties remaining unresolved.

Every day that passes means that some of our children continue to fall through the identification net, and they do not receive the help that they need when they need it. Most importantly, every day that passes means that this Assembly continues to fail children with special educational needs.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer, even though the substance of it was disappointing. Will she clarify to the House why her proposals following the special educational needs review have not been tabled for discussion by the Executive?

The Minister of Education: As I said, I have brought the matter to the Executive on a number of occasions. One party is blocking the proposals from getting on the agenda. Last week, we heard the reasons why. There is a lack of progressive thinking. My colleague John O'Dowd clearly outlined some of the reasons why one party is blocking the proposals, and that party must now question its position: we cannot continue to fail children with special needs. Therefore, I expect the proposals to be on the Executive's agenda for discussion.

Ms Anderson: With respect to Question 8, how does the Minister intend to spend the £25 million? Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Minister of Education: We are already spending £188 million in relation to children with special needs. In addition, we have an extra £25 million. We are making sure that, as well as providing for special needs children, we are providing for the further category of children with additional educational needs, so that we remove barriers to learning at an early stage. The proposals are progressive and radical,

and intensive work has been carried out by experts in the field.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her response. Given that every parent's greatest fear is to be told that their child has special needs, will the review of special needs services ensure that the statementing process is streamlined and made less worrying for parents?

The Minister of Education: Until I publish the matter for consultation, it is not possible to answer the Member's question in detail, although his point is well made. The statementing process takes far too long and it stops early intervention and intervention at the point of need. The proposals will ensure that we intervene earlier and that we take a whole-school approach with respect to special needs children.

Mr Kennedy: Twenty-two minutes have passed. I will see whether I can get an answer to a question. Will the Minister explain how efficiency savings of £2.5 million in the provision of special education in 2010-11 will be affected given that she has proposed increased spending of £25 million?

The Minister of Education: We are already spending £188 million; we need to ask ourselves whether we are spending it in the best way. Much of our psychologists' time is spent on the statementing process, yet many children are left without the support that they need. The extra £25 million for special needs children is an important resource that must be freed up as soon as possible.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá ceist agam faoi na daltaí úra a tháinig isteach go dtí an tír seo agus na riachtanais speisialta oideachais atá acu.

Does the Minister agree that newcomer pupils also have special needs and that the policy on newcomer pupils that she published recently fails to outline how services, such as educational psychology, speech and language therapy, and education welfare, will be adapted to cater for their needs? Moreover, will she assure the House that that glaring omission will be rectified without further delay? Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

The Minister of Education: As the Member knows, I launched the newcomer policy, which is part of the 'Every School a Good School' policy, at Botanic Primary School. Members will know that a growing number of newcomer pupils have come to the island of Ireland. In the North, we have newcomer pupils from many different countries. Our Department has very progressive policies on newcomer pupils, and we sent a toolkit for diversity to every primary school throughout the Thirty-two Counties.

At the North/South Ministerial Council last week, head teachers from right across the island gave a presentation on the strategies that are being used to ensure that we make the most appropriate interventions for newcomer pupils. English as an additional language is one of the areas in which we need to assess our provision. Our Department has some of the most progressive proposals on this island. I was very proud of many of the principals who presented to Batt O'Keefe, Reg Empey and me at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting.

The Member asked about the provision of services such as educational psychology for newcomer pupils. The 'Every School a Good School' and the 'Review of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion' documents are both part of the same whole-school approach to those matters, and we await the proposals from the review of special needs.

Mr Storey: The Minister has yet again rehearsed the importance of children with special needs. However, in the wake of the collapse of the Republic of Ireland Government's funding of the Middletown Centre for Autism, when will she tell the House about her plans? Rather than merely issuing press releases, when will she tell the elected representatives in the Chamber how the money will be spent to directly deliver for children who suffer from autism and their parents, rather than being put into a scheme that faces financial crisis?

The Minister of Education: I respectfully suggest that the Member reads his programme to find out when I will make a statement about the North/South Ministerial Council and the Middletown all-Ireland centre of excellence. The Middletown Centre for Autism is very good; we had our meeting there last week. It is regrettable that the Government in the South of Ireland have said that they cannot currently afford to continue supporting the centre in the way that we had previously agreed.

However, the North/South Ministerial Council meeting was very useful, and we have agreed to review the decision that was made by the Minister in the South of Ireland. I very much look forward to continued discussions on the matter. The Middletown centre is world-class, and it provides some of the best training on the island. Indeed, I met teachers from various communities who told me that North Carolina is the only other place in which such training is available. Thankfully, there are now opportunities on the island of Ireland that we did not have before, and that will continue.

Area-based Planning

6. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made with Area-based Planning.
(AQO 2776/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá dul chun cinn maith déanta ar an ngné seo. Eisíodh mo dhréacht-pháipéar beartais ar phleanáil bhunaithe sa cheantar don údarás um oideachas agus scileanna le haghaidh comhairliúcháin phoiblí anuraidh. Ina dhiaidh sin, cuireadh an beartas faoi bhráid Choiste Oideachais an Tionóil le haghaidh a bhreithnithe.

Good progress has been made. My draft policy on area-based planning for the education and skills authority was issued for public consultation last year, and it is now being considered by the Committee for Education. I understand that very good progress has also been made with the post-primary exercise that I announced last year. The central group will report to me on that exercise shortly.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister explain what will happen to the children in my constituency of South Antrim who have no choice but to commute outside the constituency, to schools in Belfast, Ballymena and Magherafelt? Those children will be at a severe disadvantage when the proposed area-plan postcode lottery is introduced.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister of Education: I agree with the Member that far too many children are leaving their home towns and villages and spending hours travelling to schools that are not local to them. Public money must not be spent in a way that is disadvantageous for young people. The transfer 2010 guidelines that I brought forward are about family, geography and community. They are about building up local communities and cohesion and keeping keeping brothers and sisters together. Too many children are passing one other, in buses, and are not members of their local schools. One reason why I introduced transfer 2010 was to avoid such situations; another was so that children could be a major part of the local community.

3.00 pm

I agree with the Member: we must create a system that has an area-based-planning approach and builds up local schools, rather than the willy-nilly approach that has been taken in the past. Far too many young people — thousands of them — are travelling into Belfast, and that is decimating local schools.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Mr Speaker: Questions 1 and 2 have been withdrawn.

Holylands Stakeholders Forum

3. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the recent meeting of the Holylands stakeholders forum; and what actions his Department will take to address antisocial behaviour in the Holylands.
(AQO 2793/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I was encouraged by the discussions that took place at the forum on 7 May 2009. On the basis of those discussions, a draft report will be produced and circulated to all the delegates for their consideration. Tackling antisocial behaviour requires a multi-agency approach. When the report is finalised, I shall write to the relevant agencies and organisations, including my Executive colleagues, with a view to agreeing the way forward.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his reply. I accept that that is a complex problem, involving not only the universities but the Government. Will the Minister consider forming an interdepartmental task force to ensure that all relevant agencies work together on the action plans to address the issue comprehensively?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member will be aware that a number of groups exist. My purpose in convening a meeting of stakeholders was not to create any more tiers of administration or bureaucracy; it was to bring people together and to give a political lead in a situation that had deteriorated rapidly. I will await the outcome of the report, but as the Member knows, Belfast City Council and other groups meet already. It is clear that a number of Departments, as well as the Northern Ireland Office and other groups, will be involved in the solution. We must not forget that the most important group in influencing events comprises the students.

I cannot confirm that another body will be created; we shall see what the report says. I intend, subject to the details of the report, to reconvene the stakeholders in the autumn, by which time I hope that we will have a comprehensive proposal to put forward. We shall ask other Departments, agencies, the students, the residents and others to follow a particular course of action. Our actions on the matter are a work in progress.

Mr Spratt: I welcome the Minister's initiative. I was unable to go to the meeting, but I was invited. Does the Minister agree that not all of the problem comes from the universities and colleges and that much of it comes from antisocial behaviour, which has

been created and allowed to build up over the years? Does he agree that the Police Service of Northern Ireland must play a major role to ensure that anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) and other measures are used in the area? The people of the area have been plagued by the problem for years. Will the Minister encourage the Police Service to do its bit in coming to terms with the problem of antisocial behaviour in the Holylands area?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member is correct in saying that the problem does not come exclusively from students at the universities and the colleges. In fact, because of the number of houses in multiple occupation in the area, some of the people in question have nothing to do with the universities.

The PSNI was invited to the meeting and was present, as were representatives from the NIO. Their involvement will be critical because of certain specific issues, and the Member will be aware of some of those. For instance, under current legislation, police cannot even go into a front garden of a house where misbehaviour is taking place. Such stupidity limits the action that the police can take. Consequently, the area becomes a place of misery for its residents.

ASBOs have not proved to be terribly successful, and I am not convinced that they necessarily are the answer. The Member is correct to say that the problem's causes are widespread and complicated, and there is no single cure. That will take time and a multi-agency approach. Certain issues are at play that are unrelated to the universities. The Member has to look only at the addresses of some of the people who have been charged to detect that a broad spectrum of people has been involved. People who do not reside in the area come into it simply to participate in trouble. The Member is well aware of those issues.

Mrs Hanna: Is the Minister aware of any plans by the universities or, indeed, by the private sector to develop alternative student accommodation?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Yes, I am. Belfast City Council has received a planning application for 260 units of accommodation at the Elms Village, and that raises problems. Recently, I met representatives of the area's residents' association, who expressed concern at the prospect. Equally, residents of the Holylands say that the density of students in that area is too great, and they want the universities to provide more student accommodation. Therefore, a fundamental conflict exists, which the process must resolve. I hope that after the report is brought to me during the summer, my Department can come back in the autumn with clear proposals that can be followed to ensure that the disgraceful scenes that occurred in March 2009 are not repeated in 2010.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he confirm whether the need to provide adequate suitable student accommodation is likely to be one factor that will be considered when assessing the University of Ulster's proposals for the Cathedral Quarter?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member's assumption is correct. The Department has received a proposal from the University of Ulster to move some of its courses to its Belfast campus. The university intends to expand that campus significantly, which could increase pressure on the Holylands. That issue must be taken into account. My Department has not had any detailed discussion with the University of Ulster on that issue, but I can assure the Member that it is at the top of my list.

Student Accommodation

4. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to ensure that Queen's University and the University of Ulster will provide more student accommodation in line with universities in other parts of the UK. (AQO 2794/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Mr Neeson's question relates to previous questions. Provision of accommodation is primarily an issue for the universities. I have been advised by the University of Ulster that current provision at its Jordanstown campus is not fully occupied, so it has no plans to expand that accommodation. To date, Queen's University has invested some £45 million in creating the Elms Village. Recently, a planning application for 260 bed spaces for postgraduate and international students at the Elms Village has been submitted.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for his reply. Obviously, my question relates to previous questions. Is the accommodation that has been proposed at the Elms Village intended only for international and postgraduate students? Accommodation for first-year students is needed. Does the Minister acknowledge that universities across the water provide, on average, 25% of student accommodation whereas Queen's University provides only 15%?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: There is no doubt that that is the case. Indeed, I challenge those figures and say that the percentage of accommodation that is offered by Queen's University might even be less than that. Levels of student accommodation are primarily in the university's remit. It is commonplace for other universities to insist that first-year students live in halls of residence.

That is not the case in Belfast, because the universities argue that there are some empty places in their accommodation. The reason for that can be

related to the rental issue, which is a matter that the stakeholder forum can consider. Some people believe that houses in multiple occupation should pay more rates because of the extra cleaning that the council has to do in the areas in which they are situated. Such a move would balance the rents.

We need to address many issues, and I assure the Member that all those are in the mix. The facilitator who presided at the stakeholder forum and his team are drafting the report of that event. As the Member knows, the event comprised six workshops. Everybody who attended has considered all those issues, and I look forward to reporting the outcome to the House at a later stage.

Mr Ross: Student accommodation is a significant problem, as are parking facilities for students, particularly at the University of Ulster campus in Jordanstown. Given the location of that campus, many students have to travel there in their own cars. Will the Minister assure the House that he will provide adequate parking facilities at that campus? Furthermore, what discussions has he had with Translink to build public transport links to that university and to encourage students to use public transport to reach the campus?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Parking is a difficulty at both campuses. I draw the Member's attention to the fact that through its green zone policy, Queen's University has, in many cases, prevented students from parking in the curtilage of its grounds. As the Members for South Belfast will know, residents in places such as Beechlands have been forced, in some cases, to park their vehicles on the streets because Queen's will not allow the owners of those vehicles on to their own properties.

If the University of Ulster were to move a significant number of its courses to the Belfast campus, parking would be part of the planning arrangements. Given the nature of such a massive development, I would be surprised if a public inquiry were not conducted, because I am sure that there would be demand for one. The Member asked about Translink; I will take that matter on board and will write to him in due course after I have had an opportunity to consult the Department.

Mr K Robinson: Has the Minister assessed the potential impact that the campus transfer may have on the housing needs of the resident population in north Belfast, which experiences housing pressures already? What steps will be required prior to any move in order to avoid another Holylands situation developing in the north of the city?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am conscious of that matter. Although they were not affected directly by the recent violence, I asked residents from the Lisburn Road area and the Malone

area to participate in the stakeholder forum because of the potential spread of the problem. As was raised in the stakeholder forum, there might be a proposal to move a significant body of students to, or to increase the number of students in, the Belfast campus. It is perfectly obvious that there is little or no accommodation in that area. That shortage will result in immediate further pressure being put on the Holylands or on the areas that are immediately adjacent to north Belfast. I expect that any comprehensive proposal that may be brought forward in due course will deal with that matter. I hope that we have learned lessons from the Holylands problem; allowing a repetition of that situation would be a dereliction of duty.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I want to follow up Mr Robinson's question. If the Minister creates a stakeholder group to consider the proposed move to York Road, it is incumbent on him to talk to people in the surrounding area rather than to allow the consultation from another area to influence the proposals for that area.

3.15 pm

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Of course, each proposal will stand on its own merits. I am merely saying that we should learn from the mistakes in one area and apply the lessons to another area.

The proposals that I am aware of for a partial move from Jordanstown to the York Street site would require a substantial programme of capital build. There would be a need for accommodation; apart from university-based and course-based accommodation, there is also an issue concerning parking and residential accommodation. All that will have to be dealt with in a proper appraisal. The proposals cannot be acted on unless significant public funds are made available. I can assure the Member that all those matters will have to be taken into account. I am merely saying that, having seen what went wrong in the Holylands, we should not make the same mistakes in another area.

Employment: South Down

5. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the changes in the numbers of (i) jobseeker's allowance claimants; and (ii) vacancies in the South Down constituency, over the last 12 months. (AQO 2795/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The number of jobseeker's allowance claimants in the South Down area has increased from 369 in April 2008 to 874 in March 2009. That is an overall increase of 137%. In April 2008, the Department was notified of 71 vacancies. The same number of vacancies was notified to the Department in March 2009.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful for the Minister's reply. My constituency of South Down has been hard hit by the downturn; the figures that he has just provided certainly confirm that. What specific actions are his Department taking to help those in South Down who find themselves on the jobless list?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I have been to visit a number of jobcentres in that area. I have been to Kilkeel, Banbridge, which is adjacent to the Member's constituency, and Newry, which is on the periphery of his constituency. There is no doubt that there has been a considerable increase in the number of people seeking work, and, as can be seen from the figures, even though the number of applicants for jobseeker's allowance has increased by 137%, the number of vacancies has remained static. That tells its own story.

A wide range of assistance is available to redundant workers who sign the unemployment register, but I suspect that the Member has in mind the large number of people in that area, particularly in the construction sector, who may be self-employed and are in grave distress and difficulty but who are not showing up in those figures. I know that that is one of the Member's concerns.

Personal advisers in the jobcentres provide information and advice on employment opportunities, job searching, training, further education options and early entry into the Department's Steps to Work programme, which is the mainstream programme for dealing with unemployment.

I can also tell the Member that in the South Down area, the Department is working as a partner in the recently formed employment task force for the Mourne area, which has been set up as a direct response to the economic downturn. The group aims to deliver a practical working document that will map out the short-term and long-term solutions for addressing issues around the current economic recession.

The task force was established in March of this year and includes all relevant stakeholders from the public, private and voluntary sectors, such as Kilkeel Chamber of Commerce, DARD, the Planning Service, Southern Regional College, Invest NI, the South Down Fishing Task Force, local councillors and a number of representatives from the business sector. Participation in that forum could be a key factor in finding a way forward in the coming days.

Mr PJ Bradley: I thank the Minister for the detail in his reply. What additional funding has been made available to retrain those from South Down who lost jobs during the past 12 months?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: We have been trying, as in all areas. The Member must understand that the Department provides services for

every part of Northern Ireland. Although the profile of the problems differs from area to area, there are parallels between, for example, the Magherafelt area and the Member's constituency. Construction was one of the key drivers in both those areas, and that has been dramatically hit.

Indeed, on a recent visit to a jobcentre in the Member's constituency, I discovered that not a single construction job was available there. Nevertheless, many people have been encouraged to participate in courses to obtain a skill and to attend college to get a qualification.

We are struggling, particularly in construction, but funds are available through my Department's main adult return-to-work provision, Steps to Work, which was rolled out across Northern Ireland in September 2008. Its design is sufficiently flexible to meet current and emerging needs, as demonstrated, for example, in recent adjustments to accommodate apprentices who have been made redundant from key sectors such as the construction industry. Additional adjustments to that programme include enhanced provision for short training courses of up to 10 days to try to give people a skill; increased expenditure up to £2,000 for training per individual, which was previously set at £300; and short training courses to assist participants to equip themselves for available job vacancies. We are trying to do all that, but there is no disguising the fact that the number of well-paid jobs on the jobcentres' books is dramatically reduced, and the Member must be aware of that.

Mr B McCrea: The problems mentioned by my colleagues are not confined to their constituencies. The Minister has outlined the assistance that is available to redundant workers; I wonder what he has in mind for the psychological damage that is done to many people. It is not just about skills, but about self-esteem and self-worth. How will his Department help redundant workers in those situations?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member touches on a sensitive issue. The nature of the client base that is coming to jobcentres has changed dramatically, as the arithmetic that I outlined shows. Many of those people have never been in a jobcentre in their lives; many are professionals who are in considerable distress. Indeed, our staff have been given special guidance, because, sad to say, they have even encountered a person who was threatening suicide. That is very sad, but one can understand the pressures that some people are facing.

Many people are tearful and in distress when they visit the jobcentre. Our staff have to deal with that, and we are trying to support them as they take clients through the available options. For someone who has been in a position of giving advice in a professional

capacity, to be faced suddenly with having to claim jobseeker's allowance at a maximum of £62 a week can be a huge trauma for many people. The advisers have been trained to the best of their ability to cope with those situations, but we cannot expect the workers at the coalface to have myriad skills. At least, however, they have been trained to recognise when a person is in difficulty and to offer referral options.

Mr Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Retraining Programmes

7. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what additional retraining programmes will be made available to cope with the large number of workers recently made redundant. (AQO 2797/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department's main adult employment programme, Steps to Work, offers immediate access to those who have recently become unemployed following redundancy. Steps to Work is an employment programme that offers a flexible, menu-based approach to targeting individuals' barriers to employment. It also provides, in a flexible way, the opportunity to gain a work-related qualification; meaningful and relevant experience in the workplace through high-quality job placements; assistance in improving essential skills; and help with developing the skills that are needed to search for a job. Furthermore, the Department has put contingency arrangements in place for apprentices who have been made redundant from the construction, engineering and automotive sectors to enable them to continue their training.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for his answer. I realise that he covered some of that ground in his answer to the previous question. How does the Minister feel that our efforts compare with those being made in England, Scotland and Wales? Has he reassessed the support that is available to apprentices?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member will know that I announced this morning my intention to launch the Skillsafe scheme. The scheme is designed to help apprentices to increase their training if they are put on short-time working. That will involve a personal allowance to apprentices, as well as paying for their training by a provider.

We are in an advanced position in nearly all comparable cases with England, Scotland and Wales. Many of the programmes that existed in England two years ago were pulled and done away with. We did not do that. England now finds itself having to rebuild many of those programmes.

As the Member is aware, employment is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland. That is not so in Scotland

or Wales. We have extra work to do here, but I am confident that when we consider the interface between further education and training and employment, we are in a much more advanced position, given that we provide training in up to 750 different locations, not including further education colleges. That does not happen on the same scale across the water.

I am confident that we are in a better position — one that is tailored to meet our own needs. That is the point: the nature of unemployment varies from region to region, and the solutions vary as well. I am, therefore, glad that we have that power devolved and that we can use it to benefit people.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the Minister's last comment but issue a warning: in England, training, including training for those who have been made redundant, is, unlike that provided in Northern Ireland, falling to huge corporations and companies that are much removed from local communities.

Will the Minister confirm what was or was not done to support the Visteon/Ford workers before they left the plant last week and what has or has not been done since they left? Will the Minister take the opportunity to agree that grave questions need to be answered about how Visteon and Ford managed the workers' pension fund? Does he support the need for there to be an inquiry? Does he agree with the representations that my colleague Alasdair McDonnell and others made to the Prime Minister for full and immediate pension entitlements to be delivered to the Visteon workers?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is stretching the parameters of the original question.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I was about to say that the Member has excelled himself, because one of his colleagues asked that question of me earlier in Question Time.

I am happy to answer the question on Visteon, because I know that it is of interest to many people. I spoke with representatives of the Ford Motor Company when I met with the plant's workers and their representatives. I had a meeting earlier this month in London with Tony McNulty, the Minister for Employment and Welfare Reform at the Department for Work and Pensions, at which the matter was raised.

We have reported the issues surrounding pensions at the Visteon plant to the pensions regulator. Allegations have been made that pots of money may have been moved into a surviving Visteon company's pension fund. At our insistence, Tony McNulty said that he would facilitate the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform's (BERR) raising of that matter directly with the pensions regulator. Therefore, we have acted on the basis of information that was given to us.

We offered to bring a clinic into the factory, but the administrators told us that they did not control the factory, and that we, therefore, could not do so. We offered alternative arrangements, and many workers, having taken up that offer, went to various jobcentres in the surrounding area. The point was made that, because of Visteon's actions, a large bill was being dropped in the taxpayer's lap and that we felt sore about that. I made that clear to the Ford Motor Company.

I believe that we have tried to address the issue, and as far as the pensions fund is concerned, that is an ongoing matter. We have reported to the pensions regulator, and I will be happy to report back to the House when we receive clarity on the matter.

Mr Cree: To return to the question, redundancy is a very serious situation for anyone. Will the Minister explain what types of retraining are provided through the Steps to Work scheme?

3.30 pm

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Steps to Work is the Department's main programme for retraining and offers an array of training opportunities. Advisers are aware that when they meet a client they must first assess his or her needs. That could include helping a client with essential skills, because we find that if people do not have essential skills it is very difficult for them to advance.

Advisers then have to look at what the client has been doing hitherto. For instance, if people have been working in the construction sector there is not much point in training them for that sector at the moment; we have to offer training in an area in which a client is more likely to get a job in the short term, which could be in retailing or some other area. The adviser then has to look at whether the client has a skill that could be developed further.

This is a much more flexible system, and we can take new qualifications in new sectors into account. For example, in light of recent revelations I said that if moat cleaning were required we would consider an apprenticeship in that, because there may be some local demand for the skill. That might be an area for us to explore.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Renewable Energy: Heating

1. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what opportunities have been

identified to increase the percentage of community heating systems using indigenous, renewable fuel sources. (AQO 2811/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I will be issuing a revised strategic energy framework for consultation shortly, and it will set out the Department's view on the future energy priorities for Northern Ireland. Among other things, the consultation will ask for views on how my Department should progress work on renewable heat. I expect that developing proposals on renewable heat will include work on community-scale solutions for generating heat cleanly, efficiently and cost effectively.

I also plan to issue a cross-departmental action plan on bioenergy soon. Following a review of the potential to exploit bioenergy in Northern Ireland, the priority for development should be on bioenergy for heating and electricity. The cross-departmental action plan will outline objectives that will support the development of bioenergy in Northern Ireland and capitalise on the area's natural resources, contribute to the region's security of energy supply, support jobs and businesses and help to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she say how and when such a scheme will be implemented? Will she also comment on grid connection charges, which are detrimental to many who want to put electricity back into the grid? I know that connection to the grid cost one company £700,000 and that such charges are stopping a lot of this work taking place. As I understand it, there are no grants available from the Department to assist with grid connection.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. As I said, we have already completed the scoping work on the strategic energy framework. I chair an interdepartmental working group on the general issue of sustainable energy, which is working very well together. It met on Thursday past.

The work on renewable heat is very much part of the strategic energy framework. We need to reduce the amount of fossil fuel that we use in this country, and an examination of district and community heating will form part of the response. As the Member knows, some very good entrepreneurs are examining the subject of district heating. The Carbon Trust has done some work on industrial sites, and work is being done in west Tyrone to look at providing heat for housing developments. Therefore, quite a lot is going on.

I am very clear that heat, in addition to other issues such as electricity, has to be included in the strategic energy framework. I hope that that framework will be published for consultation over the summer months so that the Member will see what we plan to do.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Community heating systems have been successful in Scandinavia, particularly in Denmark where more than half of all homes are heated through such schemes. What discussion has the Minister had with the Minister for Social Development about developing such an infrastructure here? What support has the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment given to companies here that want to develop community heating systems?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Community heating systems are very much part of the Department for Social Development's plans. As the Member will appreciate, however, that is a long-term strategy and will require substantial financial resources. As I understand it, such systems will become a viable option for DSD only when it is building new homes.

Earlier, I referred to a developer in west Tyrone who is looking to build 20 homes, and part of that development will include a community heating system. A lot is going on in that respect. The Member might be aware that a community-style heating system is being developed for the eco-village that the Department for Social Development is planning for the former Grosvenor Barracks site in Enniskillen. I have not had any meetings with the Minister for Social Development about that matter, but a dialogue is ongoing and will continue, through my interdepartmental working group.

Mr Cree: Is the Minister aware of thermal treatment plants in other parts of the United Kingdom? There is, for example, one in the centre of Sheffield that produces heat for a major part of the city. Would she be prepared to promote that issue with her Executive colleagues to encourage the building of such a plant in Northern Ireland? That would solve two problems.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I take it that the Member means to ask whether I will encourage other Government Departments to become involved in that sort of mechanism. One discussion at the interdepartmental group on Thursday was about the role of Government Departments in promoting renewable and sustainable energies. Departments such as the Department for Social Development and the Department of Health have quite large estates, and the Department of Health is doing good work on renewable energy sources at the new site in Enniskillen, for example. We want to encourage that. The strategic energy framework, which will be available for consultation in the summer, will look at all the available technology.

Investment: India

2. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline her Department's plans to attract investment from India. (AQO 2812/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest Northern Ireland has developed a range of initiatives to exploit opportunities in the Indian market. To date, eight projects by Indian companies have been secured, promoting over 3,000 jobs in Northern Ireland and committing to planned investment of over £85 million. Those include significant investments by leading Indian companies such as HCL Technologies, Tech Mahindra and Firstsource Solutions.

Although the economic downturn has led to a depressed market for new foreign direct investment, Invest Northern Ireland remains committed to securing investment from India. That agency now has a dedicated trade and investment office in Mumbai, which provides in-market support for all of its activities in the country and which continues to actively seek new investment opportunities for Northern Ireland.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her response and welcome the fact that Invest NI is now examining the Indian potential. However, are we not, to some extent, still stuck in the previous mindset that everything concentrated on the north Atlantic relationships? Is it not the case that the Department should, perhaps, be following the example of the honorary Indian consul, Lord Rana, and devoting considerably more effort in India to the potential for developments?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am well aware of the potential in India. Indeed, it is a two-way process: we receive trade from them, and they receive from us. We have hosted two major trade missions to India each year, and 17 local companies participated in the last mission, which was in March. In addition, I hope to go to India in the not-too-distant future because it is a very important source of trade and investment for us. I assure the Member that India is and will continue to be very much in my sights.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Although it is important for organisations such as Invest NI to attract foreign direct investment, it is equally important for job creation to attract investment from locally based businesses. What steps are being taken by the Minister's Department and Invest NI to attract investment from locally based businesses?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: A Member who spoke earlier rightly pointed out that India is not a new market, but we are looking at all the markets that are available to our

indigenous companies. That is why I have led some good trade missions from Northern Ireland to countries such as the Netherlands, and, as I said, I will be leading a trade mission to India in the not-too-distant future. We need to increase our exports if we are to meet our targets in the Programme for Government. When people go out there and realise the quality of goods from Northern Ireland, it gives us more to work with. I agree with the Member that Northern Ireland needs to build up its economy from its indigenous base. When she sees last year's figures for Invest Northern Ireland support, she will know that that is precisely what we have been doing over the past year.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. The Minister will be aware of CDE Ireland, which is in my constituency. It formed CDE Asia in 2006, and it won a major contract to develop the world's largest sand-washing facility in the Middle East. Does the Minister believe that companies like that, which see it as financially viable to set up companies in the Indian marketplace, will benefit the construction and engineering industries in Northern Ireland? I am sure that the Minister knows that it would be remiss of me not to take this opportunity to enquire whether she is aware of any possible business opportunities in India that would benefit Mid Ulster.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I am aware of the company that the Member mentioned. He is finishing off the theme that was started by Mr Ford and continued by Ms McCann, which is that companies from Northern Ireland need to look to new markets. They need to get out there, and CDE Ireland is a perfect example of that. It formed a relationship with another company, which allows it to trade in India, and it is doing so very successfully. I congratulate CDE Ireland on that. The Northern Ireland manufacturing sales and export survey indicated sales of £17.1 million to India in 2007-08. That underlines the importance of the market to local businesses, and I hope that other businesses will avail themselves of the opportunity that CDE Ireland and others have taken up.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Tourism: North West 200

4. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the contribution made by the North West 200 road race to tourism in North Antrim annually. (AQO 2814/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: The International North West 200 attracts more than 400,000 visitors to the north coast every year. The benefit that that brings to the local area is estimated to be in excess of £7 million, with a 100%

occupancy rate for surrounding accommodation providers.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for her answer. I know that the Minister, along with other Members of the House, will continue to remember families who suffer as a result of fatalities on and off the track. However, given the significance of the North West 200 to Northern Ireland's economy, will the Minister continue to encourage her colleagues in DCAL and in the Executive to support that important annual tourist attraction? This year, yet again, the numbers and visitors to the north coast exceeded expectations. Furthermore, other visitor attractions benefit as a result of such a prestigious event taking place in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I join the Member in passing on my condolences to the families of those who were killed not only at the race but on their way home from the race. Every year, there seems to be a tragedy associated with the North West 200, but, as the course clerk rightly said, the riders know exactly what they are doing when they take that route and, sometimes, it results in tragic circumstances. Therefore, I wish to pass on my condolences.

My colleague who has taken up my former position as Minister of the Environment went to the North West 200 and took the opportunity to once again underline the road safety message to people who were attending the race, and he will continue to do that.

3.45 pm

The significance of the North West 200 for tourism should not be underestimated. It is the largest outdoor sporting event in Northern Ireland, and it attracts local visitors and, most importantly, many international visitors. As I have said all along, it is vital that we have a good product to show to our international visitors. The North West 200 is a flagship product, and people from all over the world know about it.

However, the Member is right that people come not only to attend the North West 200 but to take the opportunity to visit other tourist attractions. As one would expect, visitors spend time at the Giant's Causeway, and the newly signed Causeway coastal route provides another excellent attraction that enables them to explore that part of Northern Ireland. I hope that people will take advantage of the Stay a While campaign and remain here not only for the race weekend but beyond. I also hope that, one year, the weather will be good for visitors.

Mr McNarry: I am attracted by the Minister's response to the question, particularly to what she said about tourist values. Has the Minister any new ideas or plans for increasing the promotion of other forms of motorsport in and beyond north Antrim?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: Yes, indeed. I have corresponded with my colleague Gregory Campbell, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, about the Ulster Grand Prix. He had written to ask me to ensure that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board played a full role in that tremendous road race. I assured him that I would do so because, in common with the North West 200, it will attract visitors not only from these islands but from across Europe and beyond. It is important, therefore, to regard Northern Ireland not only as a place to see road racing but as a destination in which wider tourism needs can also be met. I want to support my ministerial colleague in that respect.

Mr O’Loan: I echo the Minister’s sympathetic remarks. I agree with her that the North West 200 is an important sporting event, and it makes a huge economic contribution. However, it must be recognised that it comes at a great cost. What consideration has been given to the safety of the racers and the many thousands among the motorcycling fraternity and race supporters who attend in great numbers? Those who are involved in and travel to the race are exposed to great risk, and the Assembly must give that its serious attention.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: The Member is absolutely right, and close attention is paid to safety. However, those with the primary responsibility are the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Minister of the Environment, who is in charge of road safety. They will continue to monitor the safety of the event and hold discussions with the organisers of the North West 200. They will continue to monitor the risk to the participants and to those who travel to and from the event by road.

The North West 200 is and will continue to be an important date for sport and tourism in Northern Ireland. I want visitors to use the new Causeway coastal route, perhaps to see the Armoy Armada or the Joey Dunlop memorial garden, and to see what else Northern Ireland has to offer. It is important to reflect that visitor accommodation achieved 100% occupancy during the North West 200. That does not take into account the tents that were pitched along Portstewart strand, although it was rather windy for them this year. It is important to recognise the significance of the North West 200 to the wider tourism scene.

Investment

5. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline her Department’s plans to attract investment in the current economic climate.
(AQO 2815/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: Invest Northern Ireland’s efforts remain

focused on securing new foreign direct and locally owned investment, while providing support to assist its existing clients to undertake new investment projects and pursue a wide range of value-added activities. The forward pipeline of clients’ growth projects has reduced as a result of the current economic climate, particularly the opportunities for foreign direct investment. However, Invest Northern Ireland continues to focus its efforts on those markets and sectors that offer the best prospects of securing new foreign direct investment for Northern Ireland.

While short-term prospects remain challenging, Invest Northern Ireland has also put in place a range of tailored support to help its clients to survive in the current market. In September 2008, I launched the £5 million accelerated support fund, and I will continue to work to ensure that we offer the best possible support to help companies weather the economic storm. I have announced details today of a new short-term aid scheme that will provide eligible businesses with financial assistance to enable them to plan and, where necessary, restructure for the future while maintaining significant employment and retaining key staff so that they are ready to take advantage of an economic upturn.

My Department is also engaged in discussions to consider what more can be done to support businesses at this time. As Members know, the economic downturn is also a standing item on the agenda for Executive meetings.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. I know that Invest NI goes to the Far East, including China, Hong Kong and Japan. Long-term liaisons are needed with such countries. Will she consider opening business development offices in places such as India, Japan and China?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: Well, indeed, and that is one reason why, in my reply to the question about India, I mentioned the development of the Mumbai office, which we use a lot when we go to India. I am prepared to look at the opening of other offices, if there is a business need and they will be used by companies which go out there.

This year will probably see the greatest number of trade missions ever leaving Northern Ireland for many countries around the world. I very much support that, and I will continue to back the drive to find new export markets for our companies, which provide world-class services and products. When we go abroad, I am very proud of and I am happy to facilitate those companies.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister for her statement this morning on the short-term aid scheme. Will she remind the House how that will help business in Northern Ireland in the near future?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: That £50 million scheme is essentially a

grant scheme that will run from 1 June 2009 until the end of 2010. It will help companies which are facing short-term difficulties but are fundamentally viable in the longer term.

The idea behind the scheme is to enable companies to keep their skilled employees and perhaps redeploy them internally to other jobs or, in some cases, to smaller companies while keeping them on the larger companies' books. Therefore, the short-term aid scheme is meant to be as flexible as possible, because flexibility is important in these difficult times. We are also keen to ensure that the scheme involves as little bureaucracy as possible and that companies receive an answer as quickly as possible.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for her comments and indications of additional support. Indigenous businesses are crucial to Northern Ireland's economy. Is there any chance of additional support for those indigenous businesses? In particular, is there any support outside the norm for those companies at times in which they may face small difficulties, such as cash-flow problems?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: That is precisely what the short-term aid scheme is for. It is to allow companies which have cash-flow difficulties in the short term to make use of the money that will be made available from 1 June. That will allow them to plan for the future so that when the upturn arrives they have retained their skills and are ready to go.

The scheme is not limited to Invest Northern Ireland clients. It will be accessible to companies with a turnover of £100,000 which either are exporting 25% of their produce or, importantly, have the potential to export that proportion by 2010. Therefore, the threshold is quite low. I believe that the scheme will make a real difference to the Northern Ireland economy and that it is an example of devolution delivering for that economy. The Executive want to see the Northern Ireland economy developing and maintaining its competitive advantage.

Mrs Hanna: Last week, the C&F Group announced that it will create 250 new jobs to build wind-turbine technology in Athenry. What commitment is being given to the development of renewable technologies? Are there any potential partners, and is any financial backup available?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: There are three subcommittees of our sustainable energy working group, one of which is in relation to green jobs, the green economy and green technology. Although Scotland always says that it wants to be the leader in that area, there is no reason why we cannot also be up there, given Northern Ireland's off- and onshore natural resources. That is why we are concentrating on that area.

We are also carrying out strategic environmental assessments so that, when companies put their money where their mouth is, the assessments are in place and we do not add to the time that it takes for those people to get through the planning process. We are moving ahead. I get a little frustrated by commentators who say that we are doing nothing on the green economy. That is simply not true: I am determined to move ahead with the green economy.

Podcast Initiative

6. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment when the podcast initiative that has been worked on by the Belfast area partnership boards and the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau will be launched. (AQO 2816/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I have no doubt that cultural tourism has a part to play in Northern Ireland. We have a rich cultural identity that provides the potential to encourage more visitors, particularly from overseas, to come here. When developing a cultural product for Northern Ireland, it is vital that the product is accurate, informative and balanced and that it takes into account the needs of visiting tourists and the residents of Northern Ireland.

Looking at the podcast script for west Belfast, I cannot say that the commentary for the area is either accurate or balanced. I have concern that the script is politically biased towards one community. Before the podcasts are published I want to see a revision to the west Belfast script. I will be more than happy to support the podcast publication as soon as an accurate, informative and balanced script is produced.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am very disappointed with the Minister's answer. That is probably the first time that she has heard that today; everybody else said that they were happy with her answers. I am very angry because that process has been ongoing for more than two years. Well over £100,000 of public money will have been wasted if the initiative is not finalised by the end of June 2009. People have worked very hard to bring forward the proposal. Experts from the area and all the area partnership boards in Belfast put together the scripts. When we were asked about the differences that the Minister may have, a group of experts and historians was brought in to check the data in the west Belfast script, and they agreed the script. When will it be ready, or is the Minister going to waste more than £100,000 of taxpayers' money?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: The Member should realise that this Minister did not set up the panel to which he referred, and this Minister will not be bound by anything that others do. I have to be satisfied that the scripts are

accurate and balanced, and, quite frankly, the scripts for west Belfast are neither. One script refers to how loyalists fired from the Shankill area over the street before the peace wall was erected. To any objective person, the script suggests that everything came from one side. That is not true. It is a fact — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: It is a matter of record that that is simply not true. I will not be involved in anything that is not balanced. If the Member is seriously concerned about a waste of public funds, he should tell the people who are involved in the podcast initiative to give me something that I can sign off. If that is provided, I will be only too happy to sign off on it.

4.00 pm

Industry: Foyle

7. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, taking into account the available knowledge base, for which industry sectors the Foyle constituency is marketable. (AQO 2817/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: One of the key priority actions that was identified in Invest Northern Ireland's corporate plan for 2008-2011 was the need to shift Northern Ireland's sectoral focus towards high value added economic activity. Several sectors are identified specifically as having significant growth potential, including: creative industries; life sciences; advanced materials; biotechnology; and energy and environmental technology. We continue to market Northern Ireland as a cost-competitive location. We emphasise key selling points, such as our highly educated workforce, competitive operating costs, advanced telecoms infrastructure, and excellent university business linkages. That approach continues to deliver positive results, and I expect to make an announcement in the next few days about a significant new investment in the north-west.

The Foyle constituency is well served by telecommunications. BT has a major facility in Londonderry, which includes one of three high-performance switches that the company has located in Northern Ireland. BT also operates a major data-centre facility in Londonderry. Virgin Media, ntl:Telewest, Eircom Northern Ireland and others have facilities in the area and can provide services to businesses. In addition, the international telecommunications carrier Hibernia Atlantic is on schedule to provide Londonderry with direct international telecommunication services to North America before the end of the year. In respect of our indigenous business base, a number of home-grown companies in the north-west, such as Singularity, have shown how their niche strengths can be exploited to achieve significant global success.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Educational Underachievement

Debate resumed on amendments to motion:

That this Assembly urges the Minister of Education to put in place more efficient, targeted measures to deal with educational underachievement rather than relying on the mechanism of free school meal entitlement. — *[Mr B McCrea.]*

Which amendments were:

(1) Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"recognises the relationship between educational underachievement and social deprivation and that the use of free school meal entitlement is a robust indicator of children from low income households; further recognises that educational underachievement is caused by a range of social and economic factors; and urges all the Executive Departments to tackle these factors in a joined up way." — *[Mrs O'Neill.]*

(2) At end insert

"and notes the issue of underachievement of boys, and specifically boys from deprived Protestant areas, as identified by reports commissioned by NISRA into the literacy and numeracy of pupils; and calls on the Minister of Education to outline what action her Department is taking to address this specific problem." — *[Mr Storey.]*

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht, agus beidh mé ag tacú le leasú uimhir a haon don rúin.

I support the motion as amended by amendment No 1. My reason is that the motion is insufficiently focused, and amendment No 2 is focused too narrowly on one particular group.

Free school meals is an indicator of social deprivation and not a measure to deal with educational underachievement, as the motion suggests. Free school meals points at the direction in which measures need to be targeted, but politicians need to take effective action to deal with educational underachievement. Free schools meals is the most consistently collected and powerful indicator of the social make-up of schools. The link between social deprivation and educational underachievement is well established in the literature on the matter, and free school meals is still the most reliable means of identifying social deprivation.

However, there are certain weaknesses in using free school meals as an indicator. One is the fact that not all those who are eligible for free school meal take up their entitlement. I raised that point last week with officials from the Department of Education during a meeting of the Committee for Education. They revealed that there is no exchange of information between the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Department of Education on the issue. That is an obvious area for improvement. All those who are eligible for free school meals should receive

their full benefits, and their schools should receive the full funding to which they are entitled through the common funding formula. If the debate closes the gap between uptake and eligibility through closer co-operation between the Department of Education and the Department for Social Development, it will have been worthwhile.

We heard earlier that the education maintenance allowance does not reflect the discrepancy in uptake. Perhaps there are lessons to be learned from that.

The motion asks that more efficient and targeted measures to deal with educational underachievement be put in place. One of the weaknesses of the motion is that it falls short of specifying what such measures should be.

As I suggested already, free school meals can be viewed as a signpost to social deprivation. The information and general direction that free school meal data provide can be used alongside other indicators of educational outcomes, such as inspection reports, key stage end achievements, achievements in literacy and numeracy and public examination results. The consolidation of that information informs us in what areas, and, in some cases, in which schools, pupils are underachieving.

We must ask whether we have adopted the appropriate and correct approaches to raising standards. The 'Every School a Good School' policy focuses on a school-based approach to raising standards, although community involvement was increased following consultation.

As Members know, and as SDLP Members stated in the previous two debates on the issue, early intervention, a lower pupil:teacher ratio, increased funding for primary education and the literacy and numeracy strategy will help. However, even if all those measures were introduced tomorrow, they may not be enough.

We know from the review of the Northern Ireland literacy and numeracy strategy that other measures are needed alongside school-based measures.

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

Mr D Bradley: I have more to say, but, unfortunately, the clock has caught up with me.

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party finds itself in the unusual position of supporting the motion and both amendments. However, we have the same difficulty with the motion as that expressed by Dominic Bradley and Michelle O'Neill — there seems to be confusion with regard to the need to tackle underachievement. It seems odd to relate that to the mechanism for free school meals. The motion is asking Members to ask the Minister to put in place more efficient measures to deal with underachievement. That is fair enough.

However, one could read the motion as an attempt to protect grammar schools from an influx of children from deprived areas or as a request for more targeted measures to improve the underachievement figures. The Alliance Party will interpret the latter as the main thrust of the motion.

Basil McCrea is not in the Chamber, but, when moving the motion, he did not mention, as he normally does, the fact that the seeds of underachievement are sown at the early stages of education and long before any decision is needed on free school meals. The Alliance Party agrees with that sentiment; the seeds are sown during nursery education and early-years provision. The Minister has tried gradually to rectify that situation, but it is a long journey.

The DUP amendment highlights the problem of boys generally and Protestant boys in particular, as mentioned in the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) report, and it asks the Minister to set out her proposal to improve the lot of those underachieving boys. That is a fair question, but I presume that the Minister's policies are designed gradually to improve achievement levels across the board, and Protestant boys will benefit in the same way as Catholic boys and girls. It is difficult to see how the policy can be directed towards one religious group.

Mr Storey: When a group is identified in such a publication as the NISRA report, information should be provided on what actions will be taken to deal with that group. The Minister has been good at identifying areas in which she perceives there to be problems, and, in various communications from her Department, she has proceeded to deal with those perceived problems of underachievement. However, there is no mention of Protestant boys.

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

Mr Lunn: I am not certain that one can compare the promotion of a particular sector and the need to promote the needs of particular religious group. However, the Member has made the point.

When he spoke earlier, Mr Storey welcomed the fact that there was a Protestant emphasis. That is OK. However, speaking as a Protestant, I can never understand why the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party are so keen to preserve the system that has produced the underachievement that they are so concerned about. That is a rhetorical question; please do not get up again.

Mr Ross: If the Member requires an answer, I have one here.

Mr Lunn: The Member can answer in his own time.

The Sinn Féin amendment is completely worthy of support. I am praising everyone today. It makes the

point that free school meal entitlement is a robust indicator of how many children come from low-income households. Mr Basil McCrea acknowledged that when he spoke originally. I do not understand the perceived reluctance of Protestant parents to apply for that benefit. In light of the events of the past few weeks, Protestants do not seem to have that big a problem applying for anything that is on offer. Why should that particular benefit be different?

Dominic Bradley made the point that there is no correlation between the two Departments, so we do not know for sure what the problem is. However, the perception exists. Perhaps there is some sort of solid, Presbyterian attitude that parents suffer stigma and disgrace if their children are exposed as qualifying for free school meals.

The Sinn Féin amendment correctly makes the point that a range of factors and a range of Departments are involved in the issue. Who would argue with that except those who do not want to agree with Sinn Féin on anything? It is obvious that the Department for Social Development, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as well as the Department of Education, have major parts to play.

That said, by all means let us ask the Minister of Education to bring in more resources to target underachievement. Let us ask her to introduce a full range of criteria for transfer to post-primary education, including the entitlement to free school meals. Actually, she has already done that, but that has largely been ignored by the educational establishment.

We could ask the Minister to include, and to prioritise, if possible, the problems of young Protestants, particularly boys. We can agree that we all recognise the absolute need for joined-up government in the whole area of social deprivation and educational underachievement.

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

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party supports the whole lot.

Mr Ross: We all know the importance of tackling educational underachievement, and, as has been mentioned, the Assembly has debated the issue many times. The first motion that I ever tabled in the Assembly was on numeracy and literacy skills.

Whether it is found among school-leavers or adults, we recognise that educational disadvantage begins, as Mr Lunn rightly said, in the earliest years of a child's life. It was, therefore, somewhat unusual that he blamed the system, saying that he does not understand why unionist parties want to preserve a system that creates disadvantage. Mr Lunn said that disadvantage

does not start at the age of 10, but when a child is born, so I am not sure what his view is.

From the moment that a child is born, he or she learns. The first three or four years of a child's life is when he or she learns most and can take in more information than at any other stage in life. That is why my party has put so much emphasis on the importance of early-years education.

In the past two years, much of the debate that has taken place inside and outside the Chamber has focused on academic selection. There is no longer any need to debate that issue, because it has been settled. Schools are free to use academic criteria if they wish to do so, and there is nothing that the Education Minister or anyone else can do about that without the consent of this side of the House. Therefore, that debate is over.

Educational underachievement is unrelated to academic selection, despite the best efforts of some Members on the other side of the House to link the two issues. That link is a red herring. In some cases, academic selection has allowed academically gifted children from working-class areas to go to the most popular grammar schools.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. I ask him to reflect on the views of Professors Gallagher and Smith, who said that academic selection further compounds the problem of educational underachievement. They also said that selection tends to produce:

“a disproportionate number of schools which combine low ability and social disadvantage in their enrolments, thereby compounding the educational disadvantages of both factors.”

4.15 pm

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr Ross: Of course, for every academic who says one thing, there will be another to argue the opposite. I do not believe that disadvantage in education begins at age 10. Therefore, I do not think that the system of academic selection will compound anything.

If the Minister had her way, the opportunity that presents itself to children from socially deprived areas to get to the most popular schools would be taken away from them. Given the assurance that the DUP got through the St Andrews Agreement, we are grateful that that is no longer an option for her.

We all know the statistic that approximately 20% of children leave school without the appropriate qualifications. Examining the statistics shows that underachievement is particularly acute in Protestant working-class areas, especially among boys. In the Belfast Education and Library Board area, those boys trail girls in educational attainment by some 29%.

Therefore, I welcome my colleague's amendment because it recognises that fact, and I hope that it will gain the support of the House.

In Protestant areas of social deprivation, only 17·3% of pupils achieve grades A to C in GCSE English. The problem of underachievement in those areas has little to do with academic selection; rather, it has to do with the start that those children get in life and the ambition that they and their parents have for educational achievement.

Of course, underachievement in working-class areas is not unique to Northern Ireland. That is why it is surprising that the Department of Education has not yet set any specific targets against cities that are similar to Belfast. Why has no benchmarking taken place against comparable cities in the United Kingdom such as Leicester, Glasgow, Newcastle or Liverpool? That would demonstrate how we are doing.

When the Minister of Education talks about tackling underachievement amongst Travellers and other groups, why does she not consider the statistic that I quoted and set specific targets that are aimed at improving the levels of underachievement, as mentioned by other Members, of young Protestants?

We need to raise the aspirations of young people in the areas in which underachievement is a problem. That can be achieved by investing in early-years education so that children get off to the best possible start in life. That would include running breakfast clubs, after-school clubs and other initiatives that not only involve children but their parents so that we can raise educational aspiration where it is most needed.

One such successful initiative in my constituency of East Antrim has been the Parents and Kids Together programme in the Sunnylands area of Carrickfergus, which included parents in the learning programme. Similar schemes would be beneficial across the country. Such schemes are important to give everyone an opportunity to gain greater life opportunities through education, irrespective of their age or where they come from.

The Minister's proposal on free school meal entitlement is a type of social engineering that simply will not work. As Mr Storey said, among Protestants, a stigma is attached to applying for free school meals. Mr Bradley also said that during his contribution.

As Mr Basil McCrea said in his opening remarks, the Committee for Education has discovered that that proposal will favour children from a Roman Catholic background over those from a Protestant background. It will not address the problem of underachievement, because, as we all recognise, underachievement starts much earlier than at age 10. Moreover, exam results provide a much fairer and accurate indicator of educational need than free school meal entitlement

ever will. Educational need is what we should be addressing. Furthermore, in tackling underachievement, the focus should be on early-years education.

I support the motion and the DUP amendment, but I cannot support the Sinn Féin amendment.

Mr Elliott: It is clear that the Minister has not demonstrated how free school meal entitlement will address underachievement; that is the difficulty that we have and why we tabled the motion. How will it change the statistics? How will it provide better achievement for school-leavers? It is unfortunate that rather than introducing a strategy that would tackle educational underachievement and the real problems, the Minister has fallen back almost exclusively on her ideological crusade against academic selection and is using the blunt tool of free school meal entitlement as part of that crusade.

In the past, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Westminster Public Accounts Committee highlighted the fact that our strategies are failing and that we need immediate action.

However, the Minister has failed to introduce a strategy that will effectively address the problem, which is primarily a pre-secondary and a pre-primary school problem. We have had countless debates and agreement in the Chamber on the need for early intervention, but nothing has been done. Instead, we have seen reduced funding for after-school clubs, inadequate funding for primary schools and the removal of the cross-cutting Executive children's fund.

The early years strategy has still to come before the Assembly; that is something that we have been waiting on for ages. I cannot figure out why it has taken so long for that strategy to come forward. It is in their early years that children need real help, and real progress can be made then. Teachers, parents and the public are calling for that strategy, and it can help children from their early years right through to primary school and then secondary school.

Half of the children in Northern Ireland who are eligible for free school meals are concentrated in a fifth of our schools. The emphasis should be focused on supporting those schools and their pupils and not on introducing some type of quota system.

It is clear that teachers get the blame a lot of the time, but it is not just about teachers. Certainly, teachers have a huge and very important role to play, but a wider approach is also needed. It is a matter of examining other social measures in our community, such as a child's home life, parenting and the availability of wider services and other facilities. It is not just about free school meals.

Mr O'Dowd: Is the Member not describing in detail the Sinn Féin amendment, which calls for a cross-

departmental Executive approach to tackle educational underachievement?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have a minute added to his time.

Mr Elliott: I am glad that the Member thinks so much about his amendment, because not many other Members do. The Member is right in that some cross-cutting and wider social issues are involved. However, the debate is also about the quota system that has been introduced by the Minister, which is neither acceptable nor appropriate to the issues involved in academic selection. The Minister seems hell-bent on trying to stop any type of academic selection or excellence within this community for some reason that I still fail to see. However, that will not help to address the underachievement that we are talking about today, and that is the difficulty. We need to concentrate on those schools that are underachieving and give them the help and support that they need.

Mr Storey: The Member underscores the importance of primary schools. The recent chief inspector's report on education stated clearly, with no reference to the issue of academic selection, that one child in five leaves primary school without having reached the necessary level of attainment in numeracy and literacy skills. Who does the Minister blame for that? There is the issue about trying to get everybody else involved: she is the Minister and she should take responsibility.

Mr Elliott: I agree with the Member. We keep arguing round the point, but it is unfortunate that there cannot be a realisation from the Minister and the Department that that will not resolve the issue of underachievement.

The Ulster Unionist Party is serious about social mobility and about giving people the opportunity to better themselves. It is not about ideological engineering within our education system or the manufactured system that it appears is being heaped on us by the Minister in a way that will do nothing to solve the problem of underachievement and will be to the overall detriment of the system. That will not address the root cause of the problems that we face. The Minister's strategy is not tailored to meet the needs of the pupils, nor is it based on the facts that clearly exist.

Mrs M Bradley: In little over a month, we find ourselves debating the issue of the educational underachievement of our children and young people for the second time. The situation is particularly worrying, and there is a plethora of research to convince us that social deprivation and low attainment are inextricably linked.

The correlation is there for all to see and, while I acknowledge that the motion calls for a much more targeted approach than using free school meal entitlement as an indicator, it is difficult to see how

one can ignore all the research. The current indicator is a good means of identification; however, it cannot be foolproof. We cannot get away from the fact that a budgetary injection is required to tackle the issue. In the Chamber, I regularly refer to Professor Heckman's studies and make no apology for doing so, as the solution lies in the early-years remit and extra-curricular help and activity.

I never leave a primary school without a sense of shock when I have listened to teachers and principals telling me that they cannot get the additional help for children in their classes who need it. Some of those children — though, it is important to add, not all — get no help at home, nor any encouragement to do better than their parents who failed or to live a better life than they themselves are used to. If that affirmation is not given at home then it must be given in the schools, where education is the primary activity. Many of our schools have, over the past few years, been trying to help in that area by educating the parents: basic night classes that give parents an insight into what their children are learning and teach them how they can help their children with homework and projects. It is never too late to learn. If we can all apply this ethos, we will at least be off the starting blocks.

"Equality" is a word that we are all familiar with, yet it is also the one thing that eludes much of our society. The First and deputy First Ministers often tell us how they would like to see the future of Northern Ireland as one of equality: a better and a shared future. In order to create that, we must begin with the youngest, so that today's problem will not be tomorrow's. It is also important to reiterate that, as many of us said on 21 April, this problem is not restricted to the education system but is shared between all Departments. I would like to think that all the Departments are willing to share responsibility for tackling the problem at its core.

I have no doubt that, in the current climate, there are many budgetary difficulties. However, I call on the Minister of Finance to do his utmost to provide the moneys required to each and every Department to stem the haemorrhage of young people leaving school without the basics of an education and moving on, living on benefits — or worse, living on the proceeds of crime. The glory days of drug dealers and the like can be brought to a close only when our young people expect better from themselves. It is up to us in the Assembly to help them do that when we can. A better future for all will only begin with better understanding. It is sad, to say the least, that 47% of pupils are leaving school unable to attain a grade C in English or mathematics at GCSE. I hope, for the sake of our young people's futures, that better days are ahead.

I support the motion and amendment No 1, and I hope that the Assembly is united, because when we talk of our young people, we are talking about our future.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

I welcome the debate because I am pleased at the level of interest among Members in addressing the important subject of educational underachievement.

Since I became a Minister, I have made it a priority to tackle underachievement and inequality and promote the raising of standards in all schools. I welcome the fact that all parties accept that there is room for improvement in our education system. Members will recall that, when I first came in here, it was thrown at me that we have a world-class education system. Thankfully, people now realise that it is more complex than that.

Academic excellence for all children, not just a small number of them, is what we need. My focus is on closing the achievement gap between the highest- and lowest-performing pupils, and between the most and least disadvantaged. Let me be clear about my absolute commitment to tackling educational underachievement for every child. I want to ensure that every child can succeed regardless of background, gender, sexual orientation, religion, race, whether they have a disability, whether they come from the Travelling or Roma communities, or whether they are newcomer pupils. We will provide support for those who need it.

4.30 pm

The Department has very good reasons for using free school meals as a measure of social disadvantage. Entitlement to free school meals has long been recognised as a good proxy of many aspects of social deprivation and a robust indicator of deprivation in its own right.

Some Members said today that they believe that the uptake of the education maintenance allowance (EMA) would be a better indicator of disadvantage than free school meal entitlement. It has been noted that a larger number of pupils claims EMA, and that is to be expected. However, comparing EMA to free school meals is like comparing apples with oranges. For children to be entitled to EMA, the household income must be £32,400 or less.

The important point about free school meals is that they are available to children throughout their entire school career, and we heard a lot about early intervention from Mr Storey. However, EMA is only available to children when they reach statutory school age. That is simply too late to enable us to take the early interventions that Members have talked about and that we know can make the greatest difference.

Free school meal entitlement has proven to be a good measure of disadvantage. The evidence shows clearly that children from poorer backgrounds are at

much greater risk of educational underachievement than children from more affluent households. Free school meal entitlement data are collected as part of the annual school census. The census records the number of children whose parents apply to the education and library boards for free schools meals entitlement. Such entitlement is triggered automatically when parents are eligible to receive certain income-related benefits. Importantly, information on free school meals relates to the individual and is therefore much more robust than a spatial measure that assumes that everyone living in an area is alike.

Another key characteristic is that the measure of free school meals is current: it is updated on an annual basis and is collected, validated and made available to us as part of the census return. Those last two points are extremely important as we look to make timely and effective use of the data and resources already available to us. To do that, we want information that is relevant and up to date. Looking at underachievement and free school meal entitlement demonstrates that relevance. There can be no doubt of the link between free school meals and underachievement.

Let us look at the facts. Consider school-leavers who achieve at least five good GCSEs, including English or Irish and mathematics. On average, fewer than three out of 10 pupils who are entitled to free school meals achieve that level, compared with six out of 10 of those who are not entitled.

Members can try to sectarianise the debate, but there is no point in doing so: we must ensure that all children get what they need. Trevor Lunn made some very important points on that matter. To support my point I will quote a couple of statistics. In any given year, a higher percentage of boys from the Protestant community fails to achieve five good GCSEs — 558 boys representing 85%. However, more than 1,000 boys from the Catholic community do not achieve five good GCSEs. One can use numbers or percentages; however, depending on what one is looking for, one will get a different answer.

The same goes for people who try to differentiate between the educational achievement of boys and girls. Five hundred girls from the Protestant community and more than 900 girls from the Catholic community do not achieve five good GCSEs in any given year. All of those children deserve our attention, whether they be boys, girls, Protestants, Catholics, Roma or Travellers. I will not be distracted from my focus on helping every single child in need. The statistics are unacceptable for all children. Pitting Catholics against Protestants or boys against girls is not the way forward. Linking social background and educational achievement may be the traditional pattern but it is one that I am determined to break.

Young people from poorer families may, statistically, do less well, but that does not need to be the case; with the right support from schools, families and communities, every young person can fulfil their potential. That has already happened in many schools, and that is evidence that the right combination of support, leadership, aspirations and expectations can, and does, help young people.

Some Members have asked what I have done, and I can tell those Members what I am doing to improve educational achievement. First and foremost, I got rid of the 11-plus. *[Interruption.]* Those who do not understand the link between educational underachievement and the selective system do not understand education and do not understand educational underachievement. What have the DUP and the UUP done? All I have heard from those parties today is a defence of privilege and a failure to understand the root causes of the systemic decay in our education system. I am proud of the actions that I have taken in my Department, and I am proud of the fact that my party, the SDLP and the Alliance party support the changes that are required.

I have worked to reform our system while others have tried to block reform. For example, I have put educational underachievement at the top of the agenda of North/South Ministerial Council educational sectoral format meetings. Only last week, we talked about newcomer children and educational underachievement, and in every meeting that is our focus.

Education systems throughout the world that outperform ours do not practice academic selection. People can bury their heads in the sand and pretend that there is no link, but they are not doing the children any favours. Non-selective systems provide a more equitable chance for children. Some of the highest-performing countries —

Mr Ross: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No. You had your chance; I am making my contribution now.
[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: Some of the highest-performing countries that take part in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) do not have selective systems.

When I took the education portfolio, I inherited a system that was geared towards the needs of 40% of children. I have issued guidance on admission to post-primary schools in 2010, guidance that provides the basis of an education system tailored to the needs of all our children, not just 40%. The guidance is an opportunity to move away from a system that is based on privilege and status and rejection and failure; it lays

the foundations of a system based on social justice, equality and academic excellence; it is a system that gives all our children a fair chance.

Consider the outcomes of the old transfer arrangements: one in four children in non-grammar schools is entitled to free school meals; the ratio in grammar schools is one in 17. Therefore, if we are agreed that we need to do more to redress that imbalance, surely a free school meal entitlement admissions criterion is the fairest means of achieving that objective.

It would be funny if it were not so sad watching the Members opposite trying to justify their defence of privilege. How did the 11-plus serve us in this year's admission criteria? How did the policies espoused by the Members opposite support the 10 children from the Shankill Road, the 16 children from the New Lodge or the 25 children from Sandy Row that went to a grammar school? There is no justification for some of the proposals of the Members opposite or their defence of privilege.

In Derry, the four grammar schools educate 43% of post-primary pupils in the county; the other nine non-grammar schools educate the remaining 57%, and 13% of children are entitled to free school meals. From the three primary schools largely serving the Sandy Row area, 11 out of 79 pupils transferred to a grammar school. From the three primary schools largely serving the Shankill area, 10 transferred to a grammar school; and from the seven primary schools serving the Falls Road 49 out of 284 children transferred to a grammar school. We need to get real if we intend to bring about change.

It is not a tenable position for a Minister who is committed to equality, social justice and educational achievement to continue with this deeply flawed system. Getting rid of the 11-plus and bringing in a fairer system is the best thing that we can do for working-class children across the North, boys or girls, Protestant or Catholic, or from newcomer communities.

Fundamental to my reforms is the recommended usage of free school meal entitlement as the first admission criterion for all schools. Let me expand on that point; children in low-income homes were much less likely to even participate in the transfer test. In schools in which more than half the pupils were entitled to free school meals, almost six out of 10 did not sit the test. Compare that to the fact that just over two out of 10 children in the most affluent primary schools did not sit the test.

Let me also tackle the claim that our use of free school meal entitlement disadvantages Protestant communities. The Family Resources Survey has been used to measure poverty in the North of Ireland. I am happy to assure the Assembly that, based on an

analysis of that survey, there is no evidence to support the fear of differential under claiming of free school meal entitlement according to community background.

The survey looked at the characteristics of children who live in households that are defined as being in poverty. It shows that 66% of the most income-deprived children live in households in which the head of household is Catholic. Analysis of the school census shows that 65.3% of pupils who are entitled to free school meals are Catholic. That is almost an exact match.

It is the same for the Protestant community. The Family Resources Survey informs us that 26% of the most income-deprived children live in households in which the head of household is Protestant. The school census shows that 27% of pupils who are entitled to free school meals are Protestant. The very close match of the religious profile of those households points to the value of using free school meal entitlement as an indicator of deprivation. Therefore, let us deal with the issue at hand — the underperformance of boys and girls in Catholic, Protestant and newcomer communities — and let us stop trying to pit one community against the other.

What actions are we taking? We are undertaking transfer 2010; the review of Irish-medium education; 'Every School a Good School' and the new newcomer policy under that same banner; the revised literacy and numeracy strategy, which is being finalised; the comprehensive review of school funding, which I have asked the Department to undertake to ensure that our funding mechanisms support my wider objectives; and the review of special needs and inclusion.

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: I ask Members on the Benches opposite to consider some of the indicators that are relevant to young girls. We have the highest level of teenage pregnancies in western Europe. Girls do not get pregnant on their own. However, despite that level of pregnancies, the Party opposite is blocking proposals for school-age mothers because of some outdated nonsense about inclusion. We must look at the statistics that are in front of us, deal with the problem by doing what is needed and not allow antiquated thinking to stop important proposals from being brought forward.

The Full Service School Network project targets areas with poor-educational attainment. In north Belfast, the project has proven extremely successful in the Belfast Model School for Girls and Belfast Boys' Model School. Building on the success of that pilot scheme, my Department has approved a further pilot scheme in west Belfast, centred on Corpus Christi College in Ballymurphy. It is intended that that project

will bring about a new relationship between the school and the community.

Finally, Members spoke about particular problems faced in some of the most disadvantaged communities in Belfast and Derry. I have provided additional funding to the Belfast Education and Library Board and the Western Education and Library Board for targeted actions in those cities. Those area-based programmes were introduced in September 2008, and —

Mr Speaker: The Minister should bring her remarks to a close.

The Minister of Education: I will look carefully to ensure that those programmes successfully contribute to raising standards. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Storey: I shall just give a brief summary of the debate, because sometimes during winding-up speeches we merely reiterate what Members have already said. Nevertheless, I thank the Members who took the time to participate in the debate, because it is important. Sometimes I get frustrated — not sometimes; every day I get frustrated — with the Minister of Education's condescending and dismissive approach to these matters. Somehow, she is above acting fairly and impartially; she is doing everything according to the rules and at no time and in no way has she done anything outside the rules. We could all question the Minister on that issue.

4.45 pm

Members raised concerns about whether we are using the appropriate measures to identify and deal with the problem of educational underachievement. Mr Basil McCrea was clear when he said that many factors impinge on our young people's underachievement. He referred to the education maintenance allowance (EMA), but, in her condescending and dismissive way, the Minister tried to brush that point off as an irrelevance.

Mr B McCrea: Given that reports from the Public Accounts Committee, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and PricewaterhouseCoopers all identified the problem as being among the Protestant working class, does the Member agree that it is strange to adhere to a measure that clearly discriminates against Protestant children?

Furthermore, if the issue is about educational underachievement, will Members on the Benches to my right please explain why EMA is 10 times more likely to be taken up than free school meals? One of those measures must be wrong. Will someone in the Chamber please stand up and defend the interests of hard-working, decent, middle-class Catholic parents who want only the best for their children? No one in the Chamber is looking out for those parents.

Mr Speaker: Mr Storey will have an extra minute added to his speaking time. Mr McCrea, that was quite a long intervention.

Mr Storey: Middle-class Catholics will have to ask the party on the Benches opposite what it is doing to support their interests. In places such as Newry, those people have been ignored in the past.

Mrs O'Neill gave a list of supposed justifications for the use of free school meal entitlement as a mechanism for targeting educational underachievement and described it as being "a good proxy", but we are not convinced by her arguments. Mrs Bradley made an interesting point about the weaknesses in the joined-up approach taken by, and the sharing of information between, the Department for Social Development and the Department of Education. She questioned whether those two Departments are taking the right approach to deal with underachievement.

It came as no surprise that Trevor Lunn tried to be all things to all people, because it is not often that the Alliance Party finds itself in that position. It would be better if the Alliance Party were to come down on one side or the other of the argument on this occasion. Mr Ross made the fundamental point that a great deal of underachievement commences in the early years, long before the issues of transfer and assessment become relevant.

Those are some of the points that other Members made, but I want to move on to the Minister. Once again, she said that she has made the issue of educational underachievement a priority. However, yet again, she went and did the very thing that we expect of her. The Minister can hardly bring herself to use the word "Protestant". She tries to mask the fact that reports specifically mention that there is a problem with Protestant boys and says that the issue should not be made into a sectarian one. Last week it was fundamentalism; now it is sectarianism.

When it suits that Minister and that party on the Benches opposite, they are prepared to go to hell and back to raise issues to do with their ideological position, whether those concern Traveller children or the Irish-medium sector. However, when it comes to Protestant boys, the Minister says that they should be lumped in with Catholics and that the issue must not be made sectarian. Let me tell you, Minister, I will ensure that you are continually held to account to deliver for the Protestant children, whom you have failed, and, indeed, for the many working-class Roman Catholic children whom you have failed.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I thought that the convention of the House was that Members spoke through you, Mr Speaker, rather than to a Member or to a Minister.

Mr Speaker: It is very important that all Members speak through the Chair.

Mr Storey: I am quite happy to say the same thing again through the Chair. Mr Speaker, it is up to the Minister of Education to ensure that she provides for Protestant boys, who, as the report clearly indicates, have been disadvantaged.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member please bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Storey: The Minister can sit there and smile —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Storey: It is not a laughing matter, and it is time that the Minister took it seriously.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I shall start off by agreeing with Mr Storey on one point. He said that he was Protestant and proud of it, and so he should be. No one on the Benches on this side of the Chamber has any difficulty with that, and we have no difficulty with targeting educational underachievement, wherever it may rest.

However, the five education and library boards have been dominated on the political side by both the unionist parties opposite. What have they done to tackle Protestant educational underachievement? They have done absolutely nothing. They have sat on their hands on every one of those boards, and they have defended a system that has let their community down. Mr Storey has had plenty of opportunity in this and other debates to explain how those in the boards have tackled educational underachievement in the Protestant community, and he has not done it.

The Minister of Education is 100% correct; one thing that the debate on transfer has achieved is a discussion on what the education system is delivering. The Minister is also correct to say that, when she first came into office, everyone said that the education system was world-class, that there were no problems with it and that everything was dandy. We are now having somewhat ill-informed debates about educational underachievement, but at least we are having the debate.

Mr Storey: Does the Member accept that, unlike the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), which can provide for one sector, the education and library boards do not have a small parochial responsibility? The education and library boards have had to provide for all education in their areas.

Mr O'Dowd: I thought that the Member was going to give me an example of how representatives from his party on the education boards specifically tackled Protestant underachievement in education, and he failed to do so.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, thank you.

My difficulty with the motion is that it is driven by the conservative ideology of my colleagues on the opposite side of the Chamber. A debate is going on in unionism in which the DUP appears to be disgusted with the Ulster Unionist Party for linking with the Conservative Party, yet the DUP is latching its wagon onto the Ulster Unionist Party in this debate.

The entitlement to free school meals is a targeted measure of social deprivation, and the Members on the opposite Benches say that the Protestant community will not apply for it. That may be a generalisation, but is it any wonder that some people in the Protestant community will not apply when, in a recent debate, the Members opposite stopped just short of accusing people who are in receipt of benefits of being spongers? If the motion were to pass today, it would further stigmatise the people who receive free school meals. Regardless of religion, gender or any other consideration, anyone who is entitled to any benefit should apply for it.

My good colleague, friend and comrade, the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, Mr Storey, said that the Minister dismissed using EMA as a measure of social deprivation. She did not dismiss it; she pointed out the factual inaccuracies in Basil McCrea's argument. EMA is based on a different threshold, and it is applied when someone turns 16 years of age. That person, as a young adult, has the right to apply for it, and they do not have to rely on parental consent to do so. If Basil McCrea's argument were to be followed through, educational underachievement would be tackled only at the age of 16.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Speaker: It is quite obvious that the Member has no intention of giving way, and the Member should not persist.

Mr O'Dowd: Educational underachievement is determined by many factors, such as social background, guidance in the home, local community leadership and aspirations. Therefore, I am amazed that the parties opposite are refusing to accept Sinn Féin's amendment.

I caution the Alliance Party and ask it to consider what the Ulster Unionist Party is asking for. Its motion is to end the use of free school meal entitlement as an indicator of educational underachievement. It does not seek the inclusion of free school meal entitlement as an indicator, but for its use to stop. Sinn Féin's amendment allows all Departments to set a course to tackle educational underachievement within their remits. Why would any party dismiss that? Perhaps, with an election imminent, some of my colleagues opposite do not want to be seen to support a Sinn Féin amendment.

Difficulty also arises because people do not rely on facts during education debates in the Chamber. Unfortunately, even with the facts set out before them during the current debate, the Ulster Unionist Party's argument is, basically, that if the facts do not suit, simply remove them and deal with a completely new set of figures.

Mr McCrea dismissed his own question. He asked whether the Minister was telling us that there is more deprivation in the Catholic community than in the Protestant community. I will answer his question: there is.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Dowd: That is the hard reality of the situation: there is more deprivation in the Catholic community than in the Protestant community.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Dowd: There is a duty on us all to remove it.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to take his seat.

Mr K Robinson: The question is where to start. Much hot air has been expended on yet another education debate. If I still worked in the classroom, I would tear out what little hair I have left.

Schools fail for a variety of reasons, which have been identified in the inspectorate's report. At the outset of my summary, I ask the Minister what positive and practical steps, if any, have been taken, not only to identify those schools, but to go and see what their problems are and to give them the support for which they are crying out. Only when that is done will there be any change in children's underachievement in those schools.

I declare an interest as a governor of two primary schools in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area, and also because I taught and was a principal on the Shankill Road. I know the challenges that are faced by children on the Shankill Road, challenges that were also faced by earlier generations of children. Various schemes were brought forward, such as the Belfast Areas of Need scheme, which was going to change all of this. We had all the highfalutin people and all the reports and academic papers to back them up.

In fact, the outcome of the scheme made no difference to children's underachievement in that area. It provided schools with curtains, carpets, and minibuses to take the children out for extra-educational experiences. It did not, however, provide what the principals of those schools needed: qualified, professionally committed staff; smaller classes; greater support for children who had special educational needs; removal of composite classes; and budgets that allowed them the flexibility to deal with their individual programmes. They got none of those. The Department could not see what was out there.

Sadly, we are another generation along the line and the same experience is being repeated. Figures are bandied backwards and forwards. We talk about free school meal entitlement, among other indicators. Those children need good, committed teachers who are dedicated to raising the levels of achievement that they currently face. However, teachers are weighed down with social and health work — any problem that is out there in the community — landed on their backs. Teachers in areas that suffer multiple deprivation have even bigger kitbags on their backs because they must try to deal with problems that occur in children's homes, not just in school. They need help and backup.

During the debate, Members referred to House of Commons reports that highlighted specific problems faced by teachers in Belfast, particularly in the areas to which Mervyn Storey referred, namely the Protestant working-class areas that the Minister is so great at quoting to Members on this side of the Chamber. Perhaps few children in schools on the Shankill Road pass the current transfer procedure. However, perhaps most attend schools outside that immediate area because their parents have moved them to schools that they perceive as more adept at adapting to the transfer procedures that have evolved over the years. They wanted the best for their children so they moved them to schools outside their immediate catchment areas. I have no reason to doubt that a similar situation occurs in other towns in Northern Ireland and in other parts of Belfast.

5.00 pm

John O'Dowd said that we have to target underachievement regardless of where it is located. I agree. However, why do we not target schools in which there are indications of underachievement? Why not send a task force to those schools? Why not reduce the size of their classes? Why not remove the extra administrative burdens that prevent teachers teaching? Why not ensure that the extended schools programme continues? Why not ensure that schools that qualify for that programme apply for it? Why not ensure that Sure Start is expanded in the community? Why not ensure that teachers who took a year out to undertake specialised training to acquire a skill in reading recovery, which often added to the burden on the remaining teachers, are not forced back into the classroom? The pupil:teacher ratio dictates the number of staff in schools.

Members should consider composite classes in urban schools; we are used to such classes in rural settings. Although there are problems with that concept, we have developed, over time, an ability to deal with them. However, there is a major problem with the number of composite classes and pupil:teacher ratios in inner cities. Why do we continue to have an ideological argument? If, as the facts, figures and research suggest, underachievement exists in certain areas, why not take action?

No amount of lecturing from the Minister will convince Members on this side of the House that she is right and that we are wrong. She constantly claims that we have other reasons for disagreeing with her policies. We want to ensure that all our children receive the best possible educational start in life, which begins almost immediately after birth and continues into the early years of pre-education and into primary-school education. The gap continues to widen, and the Minister must ask herself why it has not been closed. The Minister and the Department are responsible for plugging that gap.

In his winding-up speech, Mervyn Storey asked whether we are using the appropriate measures. I suggest that, as yet, we are not. Mary Bradley gave us a lovely quote to the effect that we must ensure that today's problem will not be tomorrow's. That is a good observation. As I said earlier, one generation has already suffered, and we must ensure that the next generation does not suffer. Moreover, Mrs Bradley referred to the fact that we are having the same educational debate for the second time in a month. It is becoming tedious, but work is not progressing. Until the situation in schools changes, we will all stand accused. To date, nothing has suggested that it is changing.

My colleague Tom Elliott discussed the need for an underachievement policy. The 'Every School a Good School' policy and other policies have been bandied around, but no policy is in place to address underachievement. Alastair Ross mentioned the importance of developing literacy and numeracy in the earliest years. That is true, and he brought that matter to the House's attention during previous debates.

Dominic Bradley referred to Gallagher and Smith. I have not heard Gallagher and Smith quoted in the House since the first Assembly. The previous Minister of Education quoted their research all the time. I do not hear them quoted quite so often by the powers that be. Perhaps a gap is opening there.

There seems to be an element of doubt about the perception of stigma and free school meals. Trevor Lunn said that the perception is that Protestant families sometimes do not apply for free school meals and that one has to try to convince them to do so, as it is their entitlement. On many occasions, I have helped people to fill in their forms and I have told them to make sure to take those forms to the office in Academy Street. I cannot say whether they did so, but I certainly helped them as far as I could.

Mr Beggs: Is the Member aware that some schools from the controlled sector have not applied for the extended schools programme funding to which they are entitled, while other schools have taken up their entitlement?

Mr K Robinson: The Member raises a very good point. I think that I mentioned earlier that there was an indication that some schools were not applying for the

extended schools programme funding for which they were entitled.

Unfortunately, the debate has wandered away from the issue of underachievement. We can speak about the different ways of measuring underachievement until the cows come home, but it has been identified, and it has been identified as being more serious, perhaps, in one community. Since we are responsible for all children, as is the Minister, we must address underachievement in its entirety, regardless of the causes. We must make sure that the next generation is not lost, and that we put in the resources that are required.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that regardless of whether amendment No 1 is made, the Question on amendment No 2 will still be put.

Question put, That amendment no 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 38; Noes 26.

AYES

Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Mr Molloy, Mr Neeson, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ruane, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Brady and Ms S Ramsey.

NOES

Mr Beggs, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cree, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Elliott and Mr Kennedy.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the relationship between educational underachievement and social deprivation and that the use of free school meal entitlement is a robust indicator of children

from low income households; further recognises that educational underachievement is caused by a range of social and economic factors; and urges all the Executive Departments to tackle these factors in a joined up way; and notes the issue of underachievement of boys, and specifically boys from deprived Protestant areas, as identified by reports commissioned by NISRA into the literacy and numeracy of pupils; and calls on the Minister of Education to outline what action her Department is taking to address this specific problem.

5.15 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Race Relations

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

Order. I ask that Members leave the Chamber in an orderly fashion.

Ms Lo: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to review the current Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, in view of the fact that the current law does not offer the same levels of protection as in other parts of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, and also given the deficiencies in the Race Relations Order (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003.

By tabling the motion, members of the all-party group on ethnic minorities and I are responding to requests from the black and minority ethnic (BME) communities who wish to see parity of protection for individuals from different racial groups in Northern Ireland in line with current and proposed changes to the relevant legislation in Great Britain.

Although we accept that recommendations for the amendment of the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 would be best dealt with under the single equality legislation process, we have seen little progress on the development of the single equality Bill since OFMDFM's consultation in late 2004. In fact, the issue did not even feature in the Programme for Government for 2008-2011. For that reason, we call on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to conduct a formal review of the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997.

The Order mirrors the Race Relations Act 1976 in Great Britain, apart from its planning law provision, which is not applicable in Northern Ireland. As one of the people who campaigned for the extension of the Race Relations Act 1976 to Northern Ireland, in 1997, I was very pleased to see legislation introduced here to outlaw racial discrimination, albeit 21 years after the legislation was introduced in the rest of the UK.

In 2000, the British Government introduced the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 in response to the report of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry. However, that Act covered only GB. A key element of that Act was to make the criminal justice system subject to race legislation. Given that we do not have an equivalent

Act in Northern Ireland, we are bound by the principle that was put down in the Amin judgement, which states that equality legislation shall not apply to services that are solely the provision of Government and that have no private equivalent. In practice, that allows immigration officers, police officers, prison officers, probation officers, tax officers, planning officers and court staff to discriminate against ethnic minorities without any legal redress. The Amin principle applies to all existing equality legislation in Northern Ireland, so it is discriminatory on grounds wider than race.

Section 19B of the Race Relations Act 1976 places a race equality duty on public authorities, and it was modelled to some extent in our section 75. However, section 19B opens out policing and a range of other purely public functions. Instead of introducing section 19B provisions into the Race Relations Order (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003, OFMDFM introduced a minimalist version of that section. That was perceived as sufficient to satisfy the requisite European directive; however, it was still a long way short of the GB duty. The Race Relations Order (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 should include similar provisions to those that are contained in section 19B of the GB legislation so that victims of discrimination on a wider basis than allowed by the Amin principle can be protected.

In 2003, the British Government introduced the Race Relations Act 1976 (Amendment) Regulations 2003 as part of their obligations under the Racial Equality Directive 2000. The direct rule Administration introduced to Northern Ireland the equivalent Race Relations Order (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003.

At present in Northern Ireland, there is less protection from discrimination and harassment under the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 on the grounds of colour and nationality than on other racial grounds. Five racial grounds are defined in that Order: colour, race, nationality, ethnic origin and national origin. However, as the race directive was considered to apply only on the grounds of race, ethnic and national origin, the Race Relations Order (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003, which was introduced in order to give effect to the race directive, did not amend the provisions in the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 as regards the remaining two grounds of colour and nationality.

That interpretation creates a two-tier system in which colour and nationality have less protection, significantly in areas such as the burden of proof shift to the respondent, as well as new definitions of direct and indirect discrimination, harassment and victimisation. The Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 should include provisions on discrimination

and harassment on the grounds of colour and nationality across its scope to rectify the problems created in the Race Relations Order (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003.

In November 2008, the British Government introduced the Race Relations Act 1976 (Amendment) Regulations 2008 to change the definition of “indirect discrimination” as required by the European Commission, but they did not introduce a new definition on “instruction to discriminate”. In contrast with GB, in Northern Ireland, the Government did not introduce any new regulations to rectify the problems of the transposition of the directive as required by the European Commission.

For some time, there have been calls for a formal review of the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 from bodies such as the former Commission for Racial Equality for Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities, and the Equality Commission. The Equality Commission recommended changes to the legislation; specifically, that it should apply to all Government activities. It also made recommendations on the effective enforcement of the legislation by the Equality Commission and a number of other recommendations. Those recommendations should be implemented.

At present, there is a planning law exception in the Northern Ireland legislation. The Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 should apply to the planning authority in Northern Ireland, making it equivalent to the legislation in Great Britain. That Order should impose a specific racial equality duty on public authorities in Northern Ireland. It should include a similar provision to the GB provision in the new section 71 of the Race Relations Act 1976, as amended by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. That would replace the current article 67 of the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997.

Due to the delay in establishing a single equality Act for Northern Ireland, it is time for a comprehensive review of the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, given its many amendments and deficiencies. In addition, securing greater harmonisation and simplification across the scope of the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 will provide greater clarity for black and minority ethnic communities, as well as for service providers and employers, regarding their respective rights and responsibilities under the legislation.

I ask for the Assembly's support for the motion.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

5.30 pm

Mr Spratt: I support this important motion and welcome the opportunity to discuss the Race Relations

(Northern Ireland) Order 1997 and the need to review its provisions.

I am an elected representative for South Belfast, a constituency with people from many different ethnic backgrounds. Although there have been isolated incidents and attacks on those folks in recent months, all the attacks were utterly condemned. The vast majority of people in south Belfast live in harmony with their neighbours. If people were to believe media reports, they would think that south Belfast is a racist area, but that is not the case, and it is unfair to classify the vast majority of people in my constituency in those terms. I and others from all the political parties have done our best to keep tensions to a minimum, and we will continue to do that.

Setting that matter aside, a few weeks ago my party colleague Diane Dodds and I visited the Chinese Welfare Association in its new premises, and we heard about the problems facing the large Chinese population in Northern Ireland. Many of those folks have integrated into our society over a long time, but many have faced barriers based on discrimination, and Anna Lo addressed many of those issues in her speech. Many of those problems have been created through various aspects of government. We must ensure that we as a Government have the necessary legislative framework in place to ensure an end to racial discrimination and harassment, because it is totally and utterly unacceptable.

The House and the Executive are driven by our Programme for Government, in which there is a commitment to implement the racial equality strategy and to promote social inclusion for new and established minority ethnic communities. Therefore at the heart of the Executive there is a commitment to protect and embrace ethnic minorities in our society. I welcome the clear commitment that the First Minister has shown on the issue, and I am sure that the junior Minister will outline the position of OFMDFM on the matter in due course. There is less protection from discrimination under the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 on the grounds of colour and nationality than on other racial grounds; that deficiency must be addressed quickly.

I fully support the motion. The many people in south Belfast from ethnic backgrounds will welcome today's display of solidarity. I hope that that solidarity will continue round the Chamber on this very important matter.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an rúin. In rising to support the motion, I am mindful of and angered by the death of Kevin McDaid, who was savagely murdered by thugs in Somerset Drive in Coleraine on Sunday night. Our thoughts and prayers

go out to his family and also to the family of Mr Fleming, who was savagely beaten and is fighting for his life.

We live in a society that hides its incapacity to address its sectarianism and racism. We live in a state where individuals refuse to confront those twin evils, where people have been taught to fear one another and where differences have been carefully fostered by an alien Government.

Racism has its own history in the North. The Six-County statelet has been subordinated to British rule. Britain has notable race problems, which the British state was obliged to recognise after the death of Stephen Lawrence, and the Macpherson inquiry identified institutional racism. We in Ireland have been part of Britain's colonial history, and partition established an institutional sectarian and racist state.

I support the motion because I agree that a fundamental review of the Race Relations Order 1997 is required to address the inherent inequalities that face black and minority ethnic (BME) communities, including migrant workers and Travellers, in a range of areas, such as education, employment, health and social care and housing. Another reason to support the motion is that the Equality Commission has no power to conciliate in cases of race discrimination that concern the provision of goods, facilities and services; nor does it have specific powers to grant assistance to individuals who make complaints under a community law provision that relates to racial discrimination. Moreover, some enforcement and regulatory elements of the police and Prison Service functions are carried out solely by those public authorities and not by private bodies, and those are likely to fall outside the Race Relations Order 1997.

The voices and concerns of ethnic minorities must be listened to and reflected in the Chamber. With no holds barred, they are calling for a review of the Race Relations Order 1997. If anti-racism and anti-sectarianism are to be effective, they must be mainstreamed and prioritised in society. Patrick Yu of NICEM has talked at length in different forums about how racist discrimination, harassment and bullying are common experiences for a significant proportion of minority ethnic adults and children. Despite that, their level of legal protection is insufficient.

At present, ethnic minorities receive greater protection against unlawful racial discrimination in Britain and throughout the Twenty-six Counties than here. A noteworthy development in the South is the national action plan against racism, which is aimed at contributing towards constructing an inclusive society in which racism is effectively addressed and cultural diversity valued.

Also worth noting is the fact that Westminster legislation places a duty on public bodies in Britain not to discriminate when carrying out their public

functions. That legislation is more extensive than the restrictive measure that is in place in the North. The North has an opportunity to exert its influence through the drawing-up of a bill of rights that would enshrine and rest on the core values of humanity, human dignity, equality, freedom, non-discrimination, non-sectarianism, non-racism and non-sexism. The British Government and the NIO must deliver a robust and enforceable bill of rights to provide the much-needed protection to the BME community and everyone who resides here.

As Members of a legislative Assembly, we are obliged to implement our power to establish an equality framework that looks to the future of a developing and increasingly complex society. Unfortunately, however, not everyone in the Chamber will want such action to be taken or progress made. At present, a fragmented array of legislative instruments exists, and it applies different standards of protection across the various strands of discrimination. That has proved difficult, confusing and costly for individuals who seek to assert their rights and for employers and service providers who seek to understand and observe their legal obligation. If enacted, such a framework would enhance race and other relations. On Friday, the concluding observations of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights were —

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

Ms Anderson: The committee said that there should be enacted in the North:

“without delay, a comprehensive anti-discrimination law, guaranteeing protection against discrimination”.

Mr Kennedy: I give my support and that of my party to the motion. I deeply regret that, once again, Martina Anderson has delivered her speech with such astonishing and gratuitous offensiveness. I am tempted to think well of her by saying that she is in election mode; unfortunately, however, Ms Anderson is always in that mode. She does nothing to contribute to a sensible or logical debate.

I, my party and unionist and Protestant people despise racism. In the Second World War, unionism and Protestantism fought fascism, unlike nationalists or republicans, who, because of their racial prejudices, preferred to remain neutral.

It is deeply offensive —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member to make his remarks through the Chair.

Mr Kennedy: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am simply saying that it is deeply offensive to hear a tirade of false allegations and abuse yet again delivered in the Chamber by Martina Anderson.

The motion is important, and the Assembly must busy itself with a structured and planned programme of revising legislation such as the 1997 Order. That would certainly give more cohesion and greater legitimacy to what we do than endlessly debating motions that are not binding on Ministers and are in danger of turning the Assembly into a talking shop or a sixth-form debating chamber. That sterile activity lends no credibility to the Assembly and gives quite an air of unreality. A structured programme of legislative revision would at least do some good in that it would improve lawmaking and keep us up to speed with developments in lawmaking elsewhere in the United Kingdom and across the EU, the Commonwealth and the world. This debate is a case in point.

Another point is that, generally speaking, unionists on this side of the House would like to maintain legal parity with the rest of the United Kingdom, save for specific issues that are matters of conscience, belief and, in some cases, common sense. Much of the legislation enacted by the national Parliament at Westminster and here in the Assembly is derived from European laws and directives.

At present, two pieces of legislation govern race relations in Northern Ireland: the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, which closely follows the Race Relations Act 1976 in Great Britain, and the Race Relations Order (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003, which implements the EU race equality directive of 2000. The defects in those laws point to the need for proper legislative revision. We would be better engaged in that business than in having this debate, the tone of which is so substantially lowered by Martina Anderson and Sinn Féin.

Unfortunately, colour and nationality are not afforded the same level of protection as other grounds of racial discrimination. Given Northern Ireland's increasingly diverse population base, that needs to be updated. "Racial grounds" as defined in the 1997 Order include colour, race, nationality and ethnic and national origin. However, the EU race directive that came into force through the 2003 regulations did not amend the provisions in line with the 1997 Order to include the grounds of colour and nationality. The partial consequence of that is that fair employment legislation and monitoring requirements do not effectively cover nationality and ethnic origin.

Therefore, we must take the opportunity to address the problems here. The Assembly must act rather than talk; legislate not debate. Let proposals be brought to the House at an early date to begin a thorough and rigorous process of legislative revision.

Mrs D Kelly: I am sure that Mr Kennedy will acknowledge that tens of thousands of Irishmen fought in the two great wars.

Mr Kennedy: I accept what the Member has said. Will she accept that that fact has only recently been accepted and properly dealt with by the Irish Administration and many who live here?

Mrs D Kelly: I accept that; however, my point is that many people fought fascism with whatever means was at their disposal.

I welcome the fact that all parties support the motion, and I welcome the presence of the junior Minister Mr Donaldson, who, I understand, met the Equality Commission with his fellow junior Minister Mr Kelly back in February to discuss the amending legislation that is required to bring our laws up to standard and into parity with those in Europe and Britain.

5.45 pm

Although Ms Lo eloquently outlined the reasons why we need to bring the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 up to date, it is, nonetheless, only one of six legislative amendments that need to be brought forward by the Executive. Sinn Féin promotes itself as a party of equality, so I am very surprised that we do not, as yet, have any of the legislation before us. As Members will know, I serve on the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Up until the start of July 2009, no business is being brought forward by the First Minister and deputy First Minister in relation to any of those amendments. That is despite the fact that the Equality Commission wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister in February 2009.

For the record, other areas of amending legislation that are required are the extension of the age discrimination legislation; the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997; the Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976; the Disability Discrimination Act 1995; the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005; the extension of the monitoring requirements under fair employment legislation on the grounds of nationality and ethnic origin; and the amendment of the exceptional employment provisions of the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 as regards the recruitment of teachers in schools. Perhaps the junior Minister will give the House an indication of how many times Sinn Féin has brought forward amending legislation to the Executive so that we can see whether actions really speak louder than words.

As NICEM rightly points out in the briefing paper that it provided to us today, those amending legislative requirements should not be seen as a replacement for a single equality Bill. The SDLP is still committed to a single equality Bill and is disappointed by the level of Executive action and progress on that matter. The Executive have fallen foul of the paralysis that exists at their heart.

Ms Anderson was quite right to point out that we are meeting today in the aftermath of sectarian violence in which one man lost his life and another is fighting for his life. That news, which goes around the world, portrays a poor image of Northern Ireland and makes all our efforts very difficult. We know of racial attacks on many homes and properties, most recently in the Village area in south Belfast after rioting at a football match.

It is important that we bring forward those legislative requirements so that we send out a clear signal to everyone in the community that we are as committed to the highest standards of equality, protections and human rights legislation as anywhere else in Europe and throughout the world. I call on the Executive to bring forward the amending legislation. I welcome the commitment by all parties today, but action and progress are needed.

Mr Shannon: As my colleague Jimmy Spratt said earlier, my party supports the motion. The most recent statistics from various community organisations indicate that there are some 16,000 people who are from minority ethnic community backgrounds in Northern Ireland. The largest group is Chinese, of whom there are some 8,000. About 20 years ago, an area in Newtownards was known as “wee China” because of the number of Chinese people who lived there. The next-largest group is probably those who are from the Indian subcontinent, who number about 5,000. There are some 3,500 people from the African countries, and we are also supplemented by communities from the Arab world and south-east Asia. That does not take into consideration the thousands of migrant workers who have poured into the Province and have integrated into life here. They are from different ethnic and racial backgrounds.

Norlin Airlan hes allus bein weill kent fer hits hospitality an' gien nattu an hit vexes me tae alloo at thair bes onie need fer onie foarm o' laa in place at maun ect es a guide tae dae a thing at bes nattu tae iz – tae bae welcomin'. In es mich es A alloo this tae bae sae A ken forebye at the reality o' the situation caas fer sim laa accuase we hae a wheen o' fowk fae ither ethnic an' racial beckgruns an' baetims thair hae bein hannlins an' apheaval atween groups. Oan accout o' thon A hae tae 'gree at the laa shud bae in place referrin' tae aa situations an tae ivry aspect o' social an' community lif'.

Northern Ireland has always been known for its hospitality and generous spirit, and it grieves me to think that there is a need for legislation to guide us to be hospitable and kind, which are characteristics inherent in our nature. Much as I believe that, I also know that reality calls for some legislation, because we have people from other ethnic and racial backgrounds and, at times, there have been problems and upheavals between groups. Therefore, I must agree that

legislation should be in place that covers all situations and aspects of social and community life.

From a young age, children are taught at school not to label people according to their colour or accent. That is something that is spilling over into adult life. There are, however, occasions when prejudice may ensure that there is no real equality. That cannot be allowed in the Province if we are ever to move forward to become all that we can become and to reach our goals and aspirations.

As other Members said, there are issues not covered in the legislation that governs race relations in the Province that are included in similar legislation on the mainland. There has been increasing migration to the Province since the Troubles ended, and, now more than ever, we need to ensure that all men and women are treated as equals. A person's race, colour or religion should never matter: if a person is fit for a job through his or her qualifications, that is all that should be taken into account. It is for that reason that the fifty-fifty recruitment process galls me and other right-thinking people. If someone is fit for a job but happens to be a white, Protestant male, that person should not lose out to someone who is less fit for the job but is, perhaps, a Catholic female. Fitness for purpose, and nothing else, should be the criterion. Having had so many constituents who were told that they had passed all the necessary tests but did not meet the criteria, I understand the need to legislate for real equality. That extends to ensuring that the majority does not face discrimination in any way, shape or form.

We are blessed with a multicultural society. A community group in my constituency, the East End Residents Association, went to great lengths to hold a multicultural day with six different ethnic minorities from the Newtownards area. They manned information stands, involved children from the community in crafts and exchanged foods from different countries. The event was a great success. It opened doors, broke down barriers and went a long way to making us all bond with our neighbours and try to move forward.

Unfortunately that is not always the case. For that reason, we need adequate legislation in Northern Ireland to ensure a fair and equal society for all people. As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I am aware of the steps that have been taken to make Northern Ireland more attractive to investors and that the way to do that is to display a multicultural society with wide and varying abilities working together in harmony. I agree wholeheartedly that there must be equality for all people in the Province regardless of background and that if a step to achieving that is to implement the same legislation that is at work in the mainland, as the proposer suggested, that is most definitely what we

must do. With that in mind, I support the motion and urge the Assembly to do likewise.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Members who tabled the motion. Racism is one of the most disgraceful scourges on any society. All people are born equal and deserve equal treatment and protection, and I find it difficult to comprehend that there are those who feel that race is a determining factor in deciding someone's worth. It certainly is not, and such views have no place in this or any modern society.

It is incumbent on us to be optimistic about the need for legislation to combat racism. We must hope and wish to see a time in the future where such legislation remains on the statute books purely as a residual protection from a problem that has been eradicated. To that end, legislation must be seen as a secondary tool in the defeat of racism; our primary tool must be education and community outreach. The stick of regulation will not change mindsets and attitudes; it can only hope to change actions. Racist mindsets can be dealt with only through addressing ignorance and hate. Nevertheless, legislation is necessary, and I support the intentions behind today's motion.

I also accept that there is a need to incorporate and ensure rights and protections for the indigenous community in Northern Ireland as well. The responsibility is not only on local communities. There is a responsibility on the foreign national communities who come to Northern Ireland to live and work to educate themselves on the background, cultural differences and diversities of the country they are entering.

At the outset, it is important to highlight the organisations in our society that are working hard to combat racism. For instance, the Chinese Welfare Association, with which many in the Chinese community work, particularly in south Belfast, does much to help. The Orange Institution has produced a series of leaflets aimed at the Protestant community in which it has highlighted the cultural links with west Africa and many other parts of the globe. Those leaflets, which highlighted the fact that racism and Orangeism are incompatible, did terrific work, particularly in Belfast. It is that mix of many community organisations, as well as better-established groups, working to combat racism that will achieve the most radical results. Members and Mr Deputy Speaker will also be aware of the work that is done by individuals in Cunningham's Lane in Dungannon and the outreach work with people from many different community backgrounds. The grass-roots groups in Northern Ireland are vital in the war against racism, and, daily, they do excellent work to educate and inform the local community and those from other fields.

The Protestant community is only too aware that people throughout the Province, particularly those who

live in border areas, have suffered ethnic cleansing. For many years, members of the Province's Protestant community have been targeted, murdered, bombed and put out of their homes.

I support the intentions of the motion in seeking changes to the definitions of racial discrimination in the legislation. It is crucial that the statutory definitions used to define racism uniformly include reference to colour and nationality. The terrible instances in which eastern European families suffered racist attacks in Belfast following a recent football match, which Mrs Kelly mentioned, highlight the ignorance and vile attitudes that can prevail among some people, and we need adequate tools with which to defeat their mindsets. However, I am concerned that some attacks perpetrated by foreign nationals on local people are not classed as racial attacks. They should be classed as such: there should be a two-sided approach to the issue.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Member agree that a great opportunity was lost some time ago when fair employment legislation was being introduced to the Province? There was great scream and outcry from certain sections of the community that that should be so. At that time, I felt that the extension of that legislation to the mainland would be a great safeguard for the minority religions in mainland GB and that, therefore, we would take on the full complement of race equality legislation that was there but which was not being sought here.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has one extra minute in which to speak.

Mr Elliott: I assume that the Member means that we could have had the best of both worlds, that we could have availed of what existed in mainland GB and shared ideas and opportunities. That is right, and we should be open to that.

The tools to which I referred earlier in my contribution must be uniform in their approach. Discrepancies in definitions in the legislation must be addressed as quickly as possible. Such a change to the legislation is a minor point in many ways. However, as with many things, minor alterations to the wording of the law can make a world of difference. In this instance, shortfalls in language create senseless and needless disparities.

It is crucial that Northern Ireland offers the same protection as the rest of the United Kingdom against unlawful racial discrimination. The duties on public authorities not to discriminate when carrying out their public functions are more extensive in GB than in Northern Ireland. That ambiguity must be addressed.

Mr O'Loan: I also welcome the motion that has been tabled by members of the Assembly all-party group on ethnic minorities, of which I am a member. Other Members have set the context for the discussion

in relation to attacks on ethnic minorities, and it is right to do that. I am aware of such attacks in my own area and in other areas.

The situation is even worse than it is presented as being, because attacks are under reported and often not known about, and they are minimised because members of ethnic-minority communities have learned that they should choose not to live in certain areas. Therefore, the attacks that we see are the tip of an iceberg, and there is a big unseen problem.

6.00 pm

Racial prejudice and overt racism are major problems in Northern Ireland, and when they occur in such visible forms as racist attacks, we can be sure that they exist in institutional contexts also. Legislation must be looked at to deal with those in particular. I agree with the motion's premise that the existing Northern Ireland legislation is inadequate.

I agree with the Equality Commission's view that we need urgent reform for two specific purposes. First, it is required to tackle inequalities. The Equality Commission notes, rightly, that well-evidenced research is available on inequalities experienced by black and ethnic minority communities in relation to education, employment, health and social care.

Secondly, legislation is required to provide, as the Equality Commission puts it, "parity of protection" with Great Britain. We need at least that as a benchmark, but there is no reason why our protections should be restricted to that base level. It is certainly unsatisfactory that there is greater protection against unlawful discrimination in Great Britain than in Northern Ireland.

The duties on public authorities in Britain are greater. In Britain, the duty not to discriminate applies to all functions of public bodies. Here, it is restricted to social security, healthcare, social protection and social advantage, and that is not satisfactory. As a consequence, certain functions of even the police and Prison Service staff probably fall outside the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. That is also the case with immigration officers, which is a particularly clear lapse at present, and with court staff. As Anna Lo mentioned, we do not have the equivalent of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000.

Furthermore, the Equality and Human Rights Commission in Great Britain has wider enforcement and conciliation powers than the Equality Commission in Northern Ireland. Legal provision in Great Britain will, in fact, become stronger as a result of the recently published Equality Bill, so Northern Ireland is being very much left behind in this matter. Members of ethnic-minority communities are being severely disadvantaged by that failure.

Many of the provisions of the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 apply only on the grounds of race or ethnic or national origins. They do not apply on the grounds of colour or nationality.

The Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities, which advises the all-party group, wants legislation that will deal with four main issues. The first is the inclusion of colour and nationality as racial grounds. The second is a comprehensive duty on public authorities not to discriminate or harass. The third is the provision for dealing with third-party harassment, such as by other employees, customers or clients. The fourth is stronger compliance powers for the Equality Commission. We, as an Assembly, should support their demand.

A review of the legislation is long overdue. In 2002, remarkably, the Equality Commission asked for such changes in its recommendations for changes to the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. As other Members, particularly Dolores Kelly, have said, a single equality Bill could embody all of those requirements and many others. OFMDFM seems to have abandoned that project.

As an aside, I mention Martina Anderson's quaint and naive view that racism simply seems to be a product of British colonialism. It is nice if one can choose to believe that. If one examines the historical record and sociological argument, one could not sustain that view for very long. It is complacency that does not stack up terribly far.

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

Mr O'Loan: For all that her party talks about equality, it has failed to bring about that single equality Bill. I support the motion, but I regret that we are asking the Northern Ireland Office to do the job that should have been done by our own Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Ms Purvis: Like other Members, I support the motion.

As other Members pointed out during the debate, untenable anomalies exist in the laws that cover discrimination in this country. In essence, those legal inconsistencies create a hierarchy of rights that, in some instances, provide greater protections for political opinions and religious beliefs than they do for discrimination or harassment that is experienced as a result of colour or nationality.

They also create loopholes that allow for indirect discrimination in some cases and, alarmingly, for direct discrimination on the part of some public authorities by keeping the *Amin* principle in place.

Reforms that are being initiated in Great Britain will create further disparities that will allow greater protection from discrimination and harassment for

ethnic communities in Great Britain than in Northern Ireland. That must be addressed immediately. It is essential that all people in Northern Ireland, regardless of race, ethnicity, colour or belief, have the same legal protections against discrimination and harassment in all areas of life, including employment and education. That should also be the case for access to services, including planning and the criminal justice system.

It is equally important that the citizens of Northern Ireland have the same legal rights as their counterparts in Great Britain. Many of those issues were supposed to be addressed through the single equality Bill process, which, admittedly, was started under direct rule. However, that appears nowhere in the Executive's Programme for Government.

That omission highlights another problem that is becoming increasingly serious as the Executive's tenure continues. Critically, some equality initiatives seem to have fallen completely off the radar of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Not only is the strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration nowhere to be seen, but the single equality Bill that was supposed to harmonise legal protections for the citizens of the Province appears not to have been given any priority at all. If the Executive, especially the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, do not take the initiative to remove inequalities and divisions in our society wherever they exist, exactly where do they expect the initiative to come from?

Without progress in our legal system; harmonisation of rights; clarification of protections; and initiatives to transform our society into shared and integrated communities with equality of opportunity, change will not take place. Responsibility for leadership in those areas lies with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister.

I join others in calling on the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to review the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 and to start the process of removing inequalities in our society by removing the inequality of rights in our legal system.

I support the motion.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Donaldson): I thank everyone who participated in the debate, including the Member for South Belfast Ms Lo for moving the motion. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the debate.

It has been one of my privileges as a Minister to attend events that were organised by ethnic groups in Northern Ireland; I have found that a very enjoyable experience. It has been one of the brighter parts of my ministerial portfolio to be able to meet people from a rich diversity of backgrounds in Northern Ireland, not least, of course, the Chinese community, which is ably

represented by the Member for South Belfast. That added dimension to our culture and community enriches life in Northern Ireland.

When moving the motion, Ms Lo talked about the lack of progress on harmonising legislation in Northern Ireland with that of Great Britain. She listed areas in which there is a lack of provision for protection against race discrimination. Of course, many of the areas that she mentioned are not devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly at present. We recognise that there is a gap. We have talked to the Northern Ireland Office about that issue, but it seems that the inclination there is to await the devolution of those areas and allow the Assembly to make the appropriate legislative provision.

Ms Lo referred to the amendment in Great Britain on indirect discrimination that was effected in 2008. I am glad to report that we will be bringing forward similar legislation in Northern Ireland. It is hoped that that will come forward in the near future; it is work in progress.

My colleague Jimmy Spratt spoke of the race-motivated attacks that have taken place in South Belfast and condemned them, rightly. He is correct in saying that the vast majority of people in South Belfast, as represented by the Members in the Chamber, are totally opposed to racist attacks. That is the case right across Northern Ireland.

Martina Anderson referred to the murder of Kevin McDaid, and all Members condemn that attack unreservedly. We had hoped that that was something that belonged to the past; not to the present and certainly not to the future. We must all redouble our efforts to ensure that the sectarianism that appears to have motivated that attack is removed from our society, and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is committed to that.

I echo the comments made by the Member for Newry and Armagh Mr Kennedy. It is unfortunate that, at times, language is used in the Chamber that does not promote good relations and reconciliation between the various traditions in here. We need to get away from the days when we referred to Northern Ireland as "a six-county statelet", because that is something that many people, including people in this Chamber, find offensive. It is unnecessary and adds nothing to the debate.

I endorse what Mr Kennedy said about the need for the legislation to be upgraded; that is something that we recognise. If we have fought against those who promoted racist ideas, then it is incumbent upon us to ensure that we do everything we can to protect people from discrimination on the grounds of their race or ethnic origin. It is true that the legislation that is in place, and the legislation that will be proposed in the future, applies not only to ethnic minorities but to

everyone, which is the point that Mr Kennedy's colleague the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Elliott made in relation to what might be described as the white majority in Northern Ireland. The race discrimination legislation applies to everyone, regardless of their colour, creed or race, and I hope that that reassures Mr Elliott.

Ms Kelly, the Member for Upper Bann, mentioned the Equality Commission's proposals for legislative amendments. We recognise the commission's position, and junior Minister Kelly and I have agreed to meet the chairman of the commission to discuss the way forward on those amendments.

Every Member who spoke supported the motion. I am pleased to confirm that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister endorses the motion and accepts its terms and the need to update our legislation to bring it into line with the rest of the United Kingdom so that it protects people from being discriminated against on grounds of race. Of course, that applies equally to harassment.

6.15 pm

Although the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 needs revising, I stress that we are committed to taking action to ensure the highest level of protection against discrimination and harassment across all racial grounds to people here while providing enhanced clarity in rights and responsibilities.

We also acknowledge that there is an apparent disparity between the protection that is offered in the area of public functions by the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 compared with the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. To that extent, it is true to say that people may be offered a lesser degree of protection here than people elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Great Britain's approach to public functions is not dissimilar to the provisions and the protections that are afforded by section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Although we recognise that there is a gap between the Great Britain and Northern Ireland legislation, it is fair to say that section 75 covers many areas that are not covered by our legislation. Section 75 is unique to Northern Ireland and does not apply to other parts of the UK. It reduces that gap between the position in Northern Ireland and that in Great Britain, but we accept that it does not cover the entire gap. There remains a disparity between Northern Ireland legislation and that in other parts of the UK.

In the Programme for Government, we stated our determination to:

"continue our efforts to address the divisions within our society. Progress has been made, but at a time when our society is being transformed, sectarianism, racism and intolerance are still too

evident. They mar our reputation, blight our economic prospects and have a corrosive effect on our society."

Sadly, at times they result in the most tragic of consequences, as we saw at the weekend in Coleraine.

The Programme for Government continues:

"For these reasons it is imperative that we all embrace the opportunity to create a shared and better future, based on tolerance and respect for cultural diversity."

That has to apply, and not just on the grounds of race. It would be nice to see some respect for cultural diversity between the two main traditions in Northern Ireland. We could set a better example in that respect. People from ethnic minorities often point out to me that they hear our talk of the need to have a shared society, yet our two main traditions cannot agree at times. We have a situation where expressions of cultural identity are opposed violently. That is something that we need to address and from which we have to move away.

We noted the UK Government's declaration of their intention to abolish the two-tier level of definitions and tests in the Race Relations Act 1976. We will wish to see the outcome of that process, after which we will consider how we should take it forward in Northern Ireland.

I take this opportunity to thank those who have contributed towards the wider debate in society. In particular, I commend the work of the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities, which briefed the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister recently on a review of the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. I know that before the debate, Members were briefed by the council. I commend it for its work, and I commend other organisations representing the various ethnic groups for the valuable contributions that they have made to the debate in the wider community.

I referred earlier to some of the key areas that were highlighted in the debate and that were omitted from the Order originally. They include the activities of the police, the Prison Service and other areas that Mr O'Loan, a Member for North Antrim, mentioned. Those matters remain reserved to Westminster, so there are difficulties for the Assembly in legislating on them. However, the advent of devolution will open up the opportunity to do so, and it would be prudent to wait for those areas to be devolved before moving forward.

We outlined recently our proposal to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to clarify the definition of the concept of indirect discrimination in the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. We are considering how to amend the Order where it allows for discrimination on the ground of nationality, in relation to pay by employers or principals in respect of seafarers who apply for, or

were engaged for, employment outside Northern Ireland. That is to comply with EU anti-discrimination law. The Order needs to be amended so that it no longer provides for the exception for seafarers from the European Economic Area and designated states.

I reiterate our stance against racism and intolerance generally. We remain committed to the six shared aims in the racial equality strategy and consider them robust and comprehensive. The first stated aim, which is particularly relevant to this debate, is to eliminate racism, racial inequality and unlawful racial discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity in all aspects of life, including public life, for people of different ethnic backgrounds in Northern Ireland. We accept that we need to turn that clearly stated objective into the legislation necessary to afford the protections that we all want to see and that Members have mentioned in the debate.

Of course, the attitudes of a small element in our society need to be tackled. The issue is not only about legislation; it is about changing those attitudes and the mindsets that go with them. Those attitudes must be challenged wherever they occur. We are determined to take what steps we can to legislate against discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity for all people. We need a stable society where people live and work together peacefully side by side, regardless of community background and beliefs. It is that mutual acceptance and appreciation that must be the foundation for our future sustainability and prosperity.

One of the cross-cutting themes of the Programme for Government is the building of a shared and better future for all; it states that we must continue our efforts to address the divisions in society. It is imperative that we all embrace the opportunity to create a shared and better future based on tolerance and respect for cultural diversity. We have made significant progress on that, and we continue 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.

However, we recognise that work to foster good relations must take place against a background of strong legislation. For those reasons, I am happy to support today's motion, and I recommend that Members do the same.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also thank Anna Lo for opening the debate. As Ms Lo said in her opening remarks, members of the all-party Assembly group on ethnic minority communities tabled the motion in response to a request from the people whom the group represents.

After the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence uncovered institutional racism, the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 was introduced to

extend the application of race legislation to the entire criminal justice system. It is clear that the Race Relations Order 1997 must be reviewed, because people need legislation that can challenge inherent inequalities. We are talking not only about racial attacks, but about the deeply rooted racial inequalities that exist in the North.

Certain public services, such as the police and the Prison Service, are not subject to the 1997 Order, and that is one of the reasons why it must be reviewed. Some Members referred to the fact greater protection exists in Britain and the South of Ireland. Legislation in Britain places a duty on public authorities not to discriminate when carrying out public functions; however, in the North, the list of public authorities required to do that is restricted. In the South, the national action plan against racism is aimed at constructing an inclusive society. Therefore, more must be done here, and I hope that a review of the legislation will be a step towards achieving that.

I wish to comment on the single equality Bill. We would be better served by a single Bill than by the mishmash of legislation that we currently have. I will touch on that issue later, because some Members made reference to it. However, the core theme of today's debate is the need to ensure that the grounds of colour and nationality have the same level of protection against direct and indirect discrimination, harassment and victimisation as do other grounds.

In her opening remarks, Anna Lo stated that little progress has been made on creating a single piece of equality legislation, and she therefore called for the Race Relations Order 1997 to be reviewed. Anna set out the key issues for such a review. In contrast with Britain, the North did not introduce any new regulations to rectify the problems of the transposition of the race directive, as required by the European Commission. The Race Relations Order 1997 needs to impose a specific racial equality duty on public authorities in the North.

My colleague Martina Anderson felt that a review of the Order was required to address the inherent inequalities that face black and minority ethnic groups and communities, including migrant workers and Travellers, in areas such as education, employment, health, social care and housing. I agree that it is very important to address those inequalities.

Danny Kennedy used this debate to attack Sinn Féin again. He talked about being offended, but some of the evidence proves that racism here has emanated from sectarianism, and that was the point that Martina Anderson was trying to put across.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: It depends; will I receive extra time to speak? I have quite a lot to get through.

Mr Deputy Speaker: No.

Ms J McCann: Sorry; I have too much to get through.

Mr Kennedy: You are not really sorry.

Ms J McCann: If I have time left at the end, I will give way.

Another point that Martina made was that the Equality Commission has no real power to conciliate in race discrimination cases. That is another reason why it is very important that the Order is reviewed.

Jimmy Spratt referred to some of the attacks that have occurred in South Belfast and the commitments in the Programme for Government to implement the Racial Equality Strategy and to promote social inclusion. He mentioned the deficiency in the legislation in that there is less protection on the grounds of colour and nationality than on other grounds, and he said that that needed to be addressed. He also made the very good point that the Chamber could send out a very clear message of solidarity today by saying that racial inequalities and racial attacks will not be tolerated.

Dolores Kelly also used the debate to attack Sinn Féin. I must tell Dolores that the single equality Bill and the bill of rights are not being blocked at Executive level by Sinn Féin; in fact, it is the party opposite that is doing that. I must clear that point up.

Jim Shannon provided the House with some statistics on the cultural diversity of the North, and we are really changing. Ireland as a whole is changing, and more and more migrant workers are coming here to work. We must embrace that cultural diversity as it sends out a message about the rich fabric of life that exists here.

However, I disagree with Mr Shannon's comments about the 50:50 recruitment process for the police. Affirmative action is needed when an even playing field does not exist. If there was an even playing field, I would agree that it is not needed. However, until we have that even playing field, it will be needed.

Tom Elliott made the point that legislation should not be the primary tool in combating racism, and that education and community outreach must be the priority. That is correct, but we also need legislation to tackle inequalities and areas of discrimination. Nevertheless, his point that we need those other factors to be in place is relevant.

6.30 pm

Declan O'Loan said that urgent reform is needed for two reasons: to tackle inequalities and to protect against discrimination. He said that existing Orders do not take account of colour or nationality. In addition, he referred to the need for a single equality Bill, but I have already covered that matter.

Dawn Purvis pointed out the fact that people from ethnic-minority communities have fewer rights than those whose political and religious rights are protected. She felt that that situation should change and that everyone should have equal rights. She said that all people in the North of Ireland must have access to all services without fear of discrimination, and, furthermore, we need legislation to remove inequalities from society.

Junior Minister Donaldson made several points. He, too, said that legislation must be updated in order to protect people from discrimination as a result of their colour or nationality. He recognised that everyone who contributed to the debate supported the motion, and it was good to hear that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister endorses the motion and is committed to taking action to tackle discrimination and harassment owing to nationality or colour.

The junior Minister commented on NICEM's work. As I said, NICEM regularly briefs the Assembly's all-party group on ethnic-minority communities to bring it up to date on matters that affect people from ethnic-minority communities. Only people from those communities can tell the all-party group about their needs so that we might challenge discrimination and embrace diversity.

I was also glad to hear the junior Minister say that OFMDFM remains committed to the six shared aims that are set out in the race relations strategy. He mentioned the strategy for a shared and better future, and he spoke about the need to change mindsets. We must be open to embracing different cultures, and that applies right across the board, to religious and political beliefs, gender issues, and so on.

I shall finish by quoting from the concluding observations of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nation's Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights:

"The Committee recommends that the State party takes remedial steps to enforce existing legal prohibitions of discrimination and to enact, without delay, a comprehensive anti-discrimination law".

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Ms J McCann: It continues:

"It also recommends that the State party consider making such comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation applicable to"

the North of Ireland.

Mr Kennedy: What about responding to me?

Ms J McCann: Sorry.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to review the current Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, in view of the fact that the current law does not offer

the same levels of protection as in other parts of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, and also given the deficiencies in the Race Relations Order (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker.*]

ADJOURNMENT

Redundancies at Nortel

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who are called to speak will have approximately seven minutes.

Dr W McCrea: I bring before the Assembly the serious issue of redundancies at Nortel. I appreciate that those redundancies affect a number of constituencies, and I know that several Members will wish to participate in the debate. First, however, I wish to express my appreciation to the Business Committee for choosing this important topic for the Adjournment debate. I also appreciate the fact that many Members are electioneering for another place and on behalf of other candidates, and, therefore, it will be difficult for some of them to participate. Nevertheless, we are debating an important topic, and I trust that it will have the House's approval. I also appreciate the presence of the Minister for Employment and Learning, and I know that he will have important comments to make in the debate.

These are challenging times for employment in Northern Ireland, and many of our constituents have endured an intolerable body blow with the loss of their jobs. The unprecedented recession could rightly be blamed for the layoffs at some of the largest manufacturing companies in Northern Ireland. However, the increasing spiral of job losses must never be accepted as a necessary consequence of recession.

Each person affected is understandably broken-hearted at the thought of joining the unemployment queues: many are without hope of finding another suitable job. I pay tribute to those who have come through that experience, faced that challenge, and have sought and found further employment. However, it will become more difficult to do so in the current recession. The magnitude of the recent redundancies will no doubt bring added strain to family life in the Province, as many people face an uncertain future on the dole.

Every public representative must endeavour to assist in every way possible at this time of crisis. I appreciate that there is no magic wand that can be waved to satisfy the needs of the hour. Indeed, there is a limit to what any devolved Government can do to alleviate the suffering of constituents. However, we must raise a united voice in the Assembly when a cruel injustice has been done to hardworking and honourable people.

It is imperative that Government agencies act in a co-ordinated fashion to bring fresh investment to Northern Ireland. The truth is that the prospects of that happening now to meet the needs of those who have been made redundant at Nortel are not high. I appreciate the efforts that our Ministers are making in that respect and I wish them every success as they continue with those efforts.

As a leading telecommunications company, Nortel has been a valued employer in Northern Ireland for several years. Earlier this year, the UK operation of the global communications company went into administration. The workers expressed their concern when the parent company filed for bankruptcy protection, but management assured them that everything would be fine.

Then, the bombshell dropped that more than 220 positions were to be slashed across the United Kingdom, including 87 at the Newtownabbey plant. Those were highly skilled and well-paid jobs, and their loss creates a worrying deficit in the Northern Ireland economy. The news sent shockwaves throughout my constituency and several neighbouring constituencies, as unemployment is a tragic blow to any individual or family.

After investigation, I found the manner and execution of the redundancies to have been extremely offensive and totally unacceptable — it must be roundly condemned. It is apparent that some people regard a proper consultation period and appropriate notice as meaningless and insignificant inconveniences that can be cast aside at the whim of an arrogant dictator. When the Nortel workers in Newtownabbey heard the news of the redundancies, it was announced that 87 workers were to be taken off the premises that very afternoon. Many of those skilled and professional workers had given Nortel years of hard work, but their sacrifice was treated with disdain. They were marched off the Nortel site like criminals.

At the beginning of May, Sammy Wilson MP, Nigel Dodds MP, First Minister Peter Robinson MP, Alasdair McDonnell MP, Jeffrey Donaldson MP and I, the South Antrim Member of Parliament, met union representatives, union workers and non-union workers in Parliament Buildings to hear about the administrators' actions at first hand.

It was evident to us that in the execution of its responsibilities as the administrator, Ernst and Young had flouted the law, and I believe that it has since acknowledged that it ignored the demands of the law in respect of its actions. The rights of union and non-union members of staff were trampled on, and Ernst and Young must be made accountable for its disgraceful actions.

In the twenty-first century no one should have the right to dismiss the rights of workers with an arrogance

that is unworthy of any significant employer, never mind a leading company in Northern Ireland. The law must be urgently changed so that no administrator can ignore his or her responsibility and act with impunity. The action that was taken could not have happened in any other region of Europe, because the law would not have permitted it.

As I said at the beginning of the debate, we are living in challenging economic times; unions and workers are not oblivious to the hard choices that must be made. However, if the firm or the administrator had engaged in meaningful and respectful discussions with the union and the workers, much anger and frustration could have been avoided. Some of the jobs would have had to go; nevertheless, the workers should have been treated with dignity, and there are laws to ensure that.

The company said that it filed for bankruptcy under chapter 11 of the United States bankruptcy code to enable it to undertake a comprehensive business and financial restructuring. Therefore, it is despicable that although the pensions that many of the workers paid into all their working lives are under threat, the company decided to pay large bonuses to executive management. Such payments are highly offensive and must be carefully scrutinised. It smells of a similar problem in the banking industry, where payments were made to chief executives.

I call on Invest Northern Ireland to make Nortel repay the grant that it received to create and safeguard employment, for it has surely breached the terms of such financial assistance.

Further investment in the training and retraining of those who face redundancy in the recession is urgently needed. To make that meaningful and positive, it is imperative that we continue to engage with union representatives. It is important that we go forward together, whether in Government, public or private employment, or among the unfortunate people who face the turmoil of being made unemployed.

Since investment in training or retraining is never wasted, we must encourage it. I listened to the announcement of the Minister for Employment and Learning in the House today that he continues to look at the situation, and I deeply appreciate his efforts in that respect. Such investment will always be rewarded with success.

The House must demand fairness and integrity in business life, and any process that leads to redundancies must be done decently and in order. I thank those who raised the issue with us as elected representatives, and I trust that their hand will be strengthened because the issue finds support across the Assembly. I assure the Assembly that those of us who are Members of Parliament are working with other MPs at Westminster who have Nortel interests in their constituencies. I

hope to have an urgent meeting with the Minister of State for employment relations, Pat McFadden.

It is important that Members use every lever to gain justice for our constituents. I ask the Assembly for its unanimous support.

6.45 pm

Mr Beggs: At the outset of my contribution, I recall the new millennium when, perhaps, Nortel was at its peak locally. The company was doing well, and it was expanding and looking for suppliers. It interacted with universities on research, and further education colleges retrained people in disciplines that would enable them to fill the types of vacancies that the company offered.

Although Nortel has declined quickly in a relatively short time, the possibility remains that the company could rise again. Departments must try not only to assist staff who have been made redundant but to ensure that that torch is kept alight. Eventually, the economic decline will end and considerable worthwhile, well-paid, skilled employment will be possible. Nortel's recent decline is unfortunate, and, perhaps, that is seen most vividly in its share prices, which, during a short period, fell from over 1,000 Canadian dollars to fewer than 10 cents.

As the Rev William McCrea has said, the parent company filed for administration in January 2009. Since then, staff have been most aggrieved by the way in which the company has treated them. Suddenly, 228 redundancies were announced in the UK, and, of those, 87 were in Northern Ireland. The administrators failed to respect what would be considered to be normal conditions, particularly from a multinational company: no staff consultations took place; short notice was given about termination of staff benefits; and company cars were withdrawn almost immediately. At a time when staff who had been made redundant, as well as those who remained in the company, most needed assistance, the employee helpline ceased.

I am sure that what hurts staff most is that, perversely, while all that was happening and people were being made redundant, senior employees were awarded bonuses. Something about that stinks. It is entirely inappropriate that at a time when a company is going through financial difficulties, senior executives should award themselves bonuses of millions of dollars. Some 45 million US dollars were paid to 1,000 employees, and top executives were paid some 7.3 million Canadian dollars. How could that happen when the company struggled? It makes no sense.

I contrast that with another company of which I am aware that managed not only to break even but to make slight profits. To do that, staff were consulted, who recognised that the company had to make savings. Staff agreed collectively that the company must make savings, protect jobs and retain skills so that when the

economic downturn ends, it would benefit. Therefore, it is regrettable that Nortel's administrators moved swiftly, treated staff badly and failed to consult them.

I want to know what Government can do. Is there a need for the Assembly to change legislation? Certain aspects of the situation may be due to the fact that Nortel is a multinational company. It would be helpful if the Minister could confirm that. Nevertheless, one would have thought that a multinational company would value and respect all its staff equally, irrespective of where they are located, and would ensure that bonuses are not paid at a time of financial difficulty.

I want to know what the Department for Employment and Learning and Invest NI are doing with the company, how they are assisting staff who have been made redundant and, indeed, what work they are doing to create jobs for the future.

Mr Burns: I commend my South Antrim colleague Dr McCrea for securing a debate on this important matter. I want to take the opportunity to say a few words on behalf of the Nortel workers.

As other Members have mentioned — and I include Dr McDonnell, who cannot attend this evening but has had meetings and representations with the workers — the Nortel staff have been treated very badly. That took everyone by surprise, because Nortel has a long history as a good employer in Northern Ireland. Some of these loyal people have spent most of their careers at Nortel — over 30 years in some cases. They have been rewarded with no proper redundancy payments, no notice period, a termination of their benefits and a reduced pension. The taxpayer will have to clean up the mess.

The workers have been denied what they are due. They have been denied their rights, and they have been treated with disrespect. They were told that it was business as usual, despite the fact that the company had gone into administration. Serious questions must be asked about the actions of the company and the administrators. There was no proper consultation period and no advance warning to the unions. As I have said, the company's actions were disrespectful and immoral, and the courts will decide whether they were legal. I understand that some employees will be taking legal action against the company and the administrator; I hope that the courts rule in their favour, because the workers should receive what they are owed.

It is clear that the laws that protect workers' rights must be reformed. The SDLP is calling for that measure, because we cannot allow this to happen again. Companies must fulfil their responsibilities to their staff; they cannot walk all over people. The loopholes in the law must be tightened, and our laws must be changed. If Nortel or the administrators have

broken laws, they must be punished and the workers' rights upheld. The system seems to have failed. We must fix the system quickly, because, in the current economic climate, more companies will go into administration. We have seen enough at Visteon and Nortel; we do not want to see this sort of thing happening again somewhere else in a few months.

In a recession, people will lose their jobs. However, the way in which they lose them is crucial. There are a number of serious concerns about the operation of Nortel and the administrators. There is no excuse for denying workers respect, and there is no excuse for denying workers their employment and pension rights. There are legal and policy gaps in workers' protection in the UK. The protection that is afforded to workers in Europe, in countries such as France and Germany, shows how light-touch UK employment law is. As a result, it has been exploited, and unscrupulous companies are getting away with disgraceful acts towards their workers, many of whom, such as those in Nortel, have given a lifetime's service. We cannot sit back and allow that to continue. That is why the SDLP calls for a serious shake-up in UK employment law.

Mr Neeson: I welcome the opportunity to debate this issue, and I thank Rev William McCrea for raising it.

I can remember that, at the turn of the century, almost 2,000 people were employed directly by Nortel and its other supply companies. I also remember visiting the factory, along with the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and being very impressed at the time. In my former role as Deputy Chairperson of that Committee, I visited the Nortel headquarters in Canada with Sir Reg Empey, when he was Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. At that time, there was a great deal of optimism about the future of the company. However, I was, unfortunately, in Montreal on the day that the shares of Nortel collapsed and the Canadian Stock Exchange had to be closed.

Nortel is still very important to the economy of East and South Antrim, and it also has many employees in North Belfast. When things were going well, the local further education colleges quite rightly provided courses to meet the needs of Nortel. I also remember the day that Sir Reg Empey went to Carrickfergus to cut the first sod for the Solelectron factory, which supplied Nortel.

Nortel's facility at Monkstown is part of Nortel Networks UK, which, in turn, is a subsidiary of Nortel Networks Corporation. Last year, the facility at Monkstown employed over 500 people, paying in excess of £18 million in annual salaries and wages, with more than 100 people employed in direct suppliers.

On 14 January 2009, Nortel Networks UK announced that an administration order had been granted against

the company, as the parent company, Nortel Networks Corporation, had successfully filed for protection under chapter 11 of the US bankruptcy code and under the Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act in Canada. The Nortel Networks Corporation decided to release 3,200 workers worldwide. On 30 March, Nortel Networks UK decided that 87 workers would be released from the Monkstown facility.

I share the concerns expressed by Rev William McCrea about the way that the issue was handled. It seems to be becoming common now that if people are made redundant, they are marched out to the factory gates. That must be investigated. I find it unfair and unacceptable that workers are being treated almost like criminals; it is an issue that must be looked at.

The company continues to trade under the administration process. Obviously, the loss of jobs is a major blow to the local economy. Last week, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment met officials from Invest NI to express its concerns, particularly about the £7.4 million clawback. It must be remembered that the value of taxation and national insurance is vital to the Exchequer and that as the company continues to provide employment, the Exchequer continues to gain from it.

The Monkstown facility used to employ several hundred people in research and development, but that has been reduced greatly. That concerns me, because it is an important element of any modern company. Although that is a worry, I note that some former Nortel workers have been employed by some new IT companies here in Northern Ireland.

This is a serious issue, and all elected Members and the various Departments must work together to ensure that Nortel continues with production at Monkstown.

7.00 pm

Mr K Robinson: I will not go over the major points that other Members made. I thank Rev William McCrea for bringing this important topic to the House.

I have a feeling of déjà vu, Mr Deputy Speaker. As has been said before in the House, we have witnessed the telecommunications industry's ups and downs. We were in a boom, and we were expanding. More than 2,000 people were employed in firms in South and East Antrim, but we then experienced a massive contraction in those jobs. Back then, the now Minister for Employment and Learning, in his previous ministerial role, was able to intervene quickly because of the prompting of the six East Antrim MLAs. We presented a united front, realised the dangers that existed at the time and asked the Minister to respond quickly by setting up a task force to address the problems, which he did.

At that stage, alternative jobs were available. Many of the people whom we thought would be out on the street were able to find different employment, and some of them were able to set up their own businesses. We weathered that particular storm rather well — much better than we expected at the time. The problem now is that there is no slack in the system. There is nowhere else to go. We are dealing with a global recession, and all that we can do is try to soften the blow in Northern Ireland, particularly for the workers who have been made redundant at the Nortel plant in Monkstown.

As has been said, not only has the Monkstown plant provided steady employment for many years for a core of workers but the extra spending power that it generated benefited shops and businesses in East Antrim. The knock-on effect of the redundancies is, therefore, felt across the area in a variety of ways. The threat of redundancies has caused uncertainty among the workers since 14 January 2009. Being a local Administration, our difficulty is that we want to ensure the future stability of the Monkstown plant. We need that plant, we need those jobs in Northern Ireland and we need the critical-mass link-up between the training that is provided at the University of Ulster at Jordanstown and the Monkstown plant's research and development potential.

We are also faced with a situation in which workers, who have been loyal to Nortel for many years in its many guises and throughout its various restructurings, almost find themselves in a Victorian scenario in which they are marched to the factory gates and waved bye-bye. It is then that problems start to emerge. How do we cope with the redundancies? What can Departments do to help redundant workers with practical difficulties? People are uncertain about their mortgages, about keeping their homes and about family commitments. All those matters raise large question marks. Beyond the hard economics of the Nortel redundancies, families and individuals feel the impact. Those workers were loyal through difficult times — remember that the firm operated at full blast throughout the darkest days of the Troubles.

On a previous visit to the Monkstown plant, on the eve of the most recent big European football tournament, I was impressed by the telecommunications-equipment cabinets sitting on the factory floor, which were destined for cities in Germany. It was through that equipment that the pictures from that tournament would go out across the world. That represents the scale and importance of the Monkstown plant. We must retain the plant and its core workforce, and promote its research and development links. I hope that the Minister will assure us that Invest Northern Ireland is making moves to ensure that the factory continues to operate, in whatever guise.

It is the treatment of the 87 workers who were made redundant at the Monkstown plant that has enraged us all. No one who has given such loyal service to any employer should be treated like that. We saw how workers who faced a similar situation in West Belfast were treated. I ask the Minister whether he can reassure the Nortel workers about their pensions. It is bad enough for workers to lose their pay at the end of the month, but to put a question mark against the pension contributions that they made in preparation for the end of their working life is a cut too far.

To conclude, Nortel's importance cannot be stressed enough. The loyalty of its workers over many years and in difficult times cannot be overemphasised. I ask the Minister and his Department, and any other arm of the Assembly that can bring pressure to bear on the administrator, the company and the powers that be at Westminster, to ensure that there is further employment potential in Nortel, not just for the folk who remain working at the factory but for those young people who are coming out of our universities and schools, who would look forward to steady employment in such an establishment.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the topic; I know that it is of particular importance to those Members who represent South and East Antrim.

My Department first became aware of Nortel's difficulties when the company announced on 14 January that it had filed for protection under chapter 11 of the bankruptcy code in the United States. We are familiar with the number of jobs that were consequently lost. Under employment rights legislation, Nortel was obliged to notify my Department of the proposed redundancies at least 30 days before giving notice to terminate employees' contracts.

I will state that again: under employment rights legislation, Nortel was obliged to notify my Department of the proposed redundancies at least 30 days before giving notice to terminate employees' contracts.

Nortel did notify my Department, but not within the required time frame. As soon as my Department was notified about the redundancies, my officials, in partnership with the Social Security Agency and staff from the jobs and benefits offices, provided an on-site redundancy service running from 31 March to 1 April 2009. Workers were allocated individual appointments to obtain information and advice on benefits, job searching, employment, training and further education opportunities.

Under employment rights legislation, my Department's redundancy payments service pays certain entitlements — within limits — owed to former employees of insolvent employers. That legislation guarantees a basic minimum payment to employees of insolvent

employers, as they would otherwise have to wait a considerable time for payment or receive no payment as creditors in the insolvency proceedings.

Outstanding contractual debt remains listed in the insolvency agreement, and it may become payable only if the sale of an employer's assets realises enough money. It is a matter of regret that Nortel workers believed that they had been working under contracts entitling them to more redundancy pay than would be payable under the statutory scheme, which is the only scheme that the administrator could apply once the company became legally insolvent.

I am acutely aware that those statutory payments can only partially compensate for the redundancy payments that the employees would have been entitled to after working for Nortel — for up to 35 years in some cases. To make those statutory payments, my Department has to agree with the administrator what those redundancy entitlements should be.

As all Nortel pay records were held in Great Britain, the administrator there received all applications for redundancy, including those from employees in Northern Ireland. All those applications were processed in Great Britain through the Birmingham redundancy payments office of the Insolvency Service. Although that is an administrative abnormality, the key issue is that most of the 87 redundant employees will have received payments, although probably not all of their entitlement, as statutory notice payments are not paid until the notice period to which they are entitled has expired. My Department is actively pursuing the issue with its counterparts in Birmingham to ensure that all due entitlements have and will be made.

I am aware of Unite's allegations that the company and its administrators did not comply with employment law in respect of the selection criteria and the consultation period that the employees were entitled to. Nortel was legally obliged to consult employees on proposed redundancies.

Employers proposing to dismiss between 20 and 99 employees must begin consultation with employee representatives at least 30 days before redundancy notices take effect. Consultation must be genuine, and is intended to include ways of avoiding, or at least mitigating, the effects of redundancy. Employees are also entitled to a statutory or contractual notice period that takes effect from the date that consultation is complete.

Employees who do not feel that they have been properly consulted or have received adequate notice may take a complaint to an industrial tribunal, which may make a protective award of up to 90 days' pay.

The issue of pensions was mentioned, and I will address it. I spoke about the pensions issue with regard to Visteon during Question Time. Before I continue on it,

I want to look briefly to the future. I have great sympathy with those who have lost their jobs at Nortel. It is important to resolve the redundancy and pension issues as quickly and as fairly as possible. We are doing everything that we can to help all those who have recently lost their jobs as a result of the economic downturn.

If any Member or trade union approaches my Department with evidence of pension irregularities, I will be happy to take it to the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform in London. The Pensions Regulator, who is already looking into the situation at Visteon, can look into any alleged irregularities at Nortel. There is no reason why that cannot happen. If there is any suggestion from the trade unions or employees of activity that is inconsistent with proper practice, the sooner we are told about it the better. To my knowledge, my Department has not been advised of any such activity, even though we were specifically advised by the trade unions in the Visteon case. If we are made aware of any allegations, we will act immediately and do anything that we can to help the employees.

Dr McCrea mentioned the role of the company and the need for the law to be changed. I will bring the points raised in the debate to the attention of my colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who is responsible for company law. I will ensure that Dr McCrea's views, and those of other Members, on the way that the situation has been handled are brought to her attention, because it has clearly caused great anxiety.

When administrators are appointed, their objective, as opposed to that of liquidators, is to maintain the business as a going concern. The administrators might argue that the only way that they could do that at Nortel was to get rid of a number of employees to reduce costs. Therefore, any action taken against them would take money out of the company and prevent its survival. That will be the argument. However, the issue of company law needs to be taken up, which is best done through the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

A number of other points were made, such as the position with clawback. Over £10 million has been clawed back already, and an invoice has gone in for the remaining £7.4 million. As Mr Neeson well knows, I had a lot of dealings with Nortel. We redid its financial memorandum on a number of occasions, and I was never out of the place; I was in Canada with the company, and my Department was regularly in touch with its representatives. At one stage, it looked as if the turnover of that one company could equal the remaining turnover of all companies in Northern Ireland. That was the scale of the Nortel operation. I remember the

Sollectron launch. The Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education actually put on Nortel-only courses, which were paid for by DEL. That is how keen the Department was to help.

Mr Beggs asked what can be done. The taxpayer is picking up a lot of the cost. DEL is responsible, on behalf of the taxpayer, for matters relating to redundancy pay, pay in lieu of notice and other entitlements. If there was a pensions issue for contributions in the short term, that could also fall to my Department if an award is made by an industrial tribunal.

In answer to Ken Robinson, my last action as Enterprise Minister was to designate areas of East Antrim as areas of particular difficulty from an employment perspective. Therefore, it is déjà vu all over again, which is a matter of very deep regret.

I am aware of the hurt that has been caused, and I am shocked to hear of the manner in which the workers were removed from the plant; I was not aware that matters had got to that stage. I will draw that to the attention of my colleague, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

I assure Members that Invest NI is working to identify who could take over parts of the business. As Members probably know, the objective is to seek purchasers for different parts of the business, and Invest NI has commenced work to identify likely suitors. Several potential foreign direct investors have been identified, and work is under way to finalise specific sales propositions for each of those companies.

I commend that work and hope that it is successful. However, I deeply regret that Members' constituents have been treated in that way, and my Department will do all that it can to mitigate those unfortunate circumstances.

Adjourned at 7.16 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 1 June 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Resignation of Mr David Burnside MLA

Mr Speaker: I wish to advise the House that I have received a letter from Mr David Burnside informing me that he has resigned as a Member of the Assembly with effect from today. I will notify the Chief Electoral Officer that a vacancy exists in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Diseases of Animals Bill

Consideration Stage

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Cheann Comhairle, the Consideration Stage of the Diseases of Animals Bill will not be moved today. I have informed the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee about my reasons for not doing so today, and I will discuss the matter further with the Committee this week. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Some of us who have no connection with the Executive or with the Committee came to the House today fully expecting that the Consideration Stage of the Bill would be taken. Would it not be good manners for the Minister to ensure that all Members of the House are informed if Consideration Stage is not to be moved, together with the reasons for that and some indication as to when it might happen?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. It is up to the Minister to decide and, obviously, she has indicated that she is not moving it. That is where it rests. It is the responsibility of the Minister and the Executive, along with the Business Committee, to decide when the Bill will be rescheduled. The Consideration Stage has not been moved, so we will move to the next item of business.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Child Support and Social Security (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009

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

That the Child Support and Social Security (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

I seek the approval of the Assembly for regulations relating to child support that were laid before the Assembly on 26 March 2009. The making of packages of child support regulations is a regular process, the purpose of which is to ensure that legislation remains up to date and transparent and that the child maintenance system operates as well as possible.

The package comprises three regulations that require the Assembly's approval: regulations 3, 5 and 8. As I will later refer to the "old" and "new" schemes, it may be helpful to Members for me to explain those: the old scheme applies to child maintenance cases in which the application was made before 3 March 2003, whereas the new scheme applies to cases in which the application was made after that date.

Regulation 3 allows the Department to disregard return-to-work credit for old scheme maintenance assessments. That credit is paid for a maximum of 52 weeks, and it is intended to help people to move into work for at least 16 hours a week and prevent their return to claiming benefits. As the credit is disregarded in the assessment of National Insurance, housing benefit and tax credits, it would be inappropriate to treat it as income in the calculation of maintenance payments; to do so would undermine the principle of the credit. It is possible to disregard the credit under the new scheme rules, and, therefore, no equivalent amendment to the new scheme regulations is necessary.

Regulation 3 also makes an amendment that is required because the equalisation of the state pension age of men and women will be phased in between 2010 and 2020. The disability premium in income support is disregarded as income for the purposes of child maintenance assessment, and, under the current rules of the old scheme of child support, it is disregarded to the age of 60, which is the qualifying age for state pension credit. The amendment is needed to allow the disability premium to be disregarded in line with the increasing age of qualification for pension credits.

Regulations 5 and 8 amend the regulations to allow the recalculation of maintenance should a non-resident parent take steps to divert income, thereby reducing his or her maintenance payments. The amendment became necessary following the decision of a tribunal in Britain. The case involved a non-resident parent who was driving

down the amount of net income that could be included in the maintenance assessment. However, the judge held that the assessment could not be altered because the regulations, as worded, did not allow for that.

Under the old child maintenance scheme, half of pension contributions are disregarded for the purposes of maintenance assessment. Under the new scheme, contributions are wholly disregarded, and, from April 2006, the cap on pension contributions was removed. Therefore, it became possible to put 100% of earnings directly into pension contributions. A small number of people began to increase their pension contributions significantly and lived on other income that was not assessable for the purposes of calculating child maintenance. As a result, their maintenance liability was reduced.

Regulations 5 and 8 restore the original policy intention by amending the departure direction regulations for the old scheme and the variation regulations for the new scheme. They allow an alteration of maintenance liability when the parent with care is aware that large contributions to a pension scheme are reducing the non-resident parent's net income.

All the above amendments are made under the confirmatory procedure. When amendments are made to a series of regulations, as in this package, some other amendments can be made. If made as stand-alone amendments, they would be subject to the negative procedure, for which the approval of the Assembly is not required.

For Members' benefit, I am happy to summarise the content of the regulations, which amount to a tidying-up exercise. Amendments are needed to child maintenance legislation to ensure that people who receive employment and support allowance are treated in the same manner as those in receipt of income support or income-based jobseeker's allowance.

In addition, people on benefit who were in hospital for more than 52 weeks were subject to a reduction in their benefit entitlement. Under the rules of the new scheme, their child maintenance liability was reduced to nil. The reduction in benefits after 52 weeks in hospital no longer applies. That means that anyone in that situation will be subject to the flat rate of maintenance liability. Therefore, the child maintenance rules are now redundant, and the Child Support and Social Security (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 will enable us to omit the provisions that relate to the hospital reduction in order to remove any possible confusion.

The amendments affect and simplify the use of parts of the decisions and appeals regulations for staff in the child maintenance and enforcement division (CMED). Information regulations are also amended to clarify the type of offence for which various bodies' officials are

liable should they make unauthorised disclosure of information obtained during their employment.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): The Committee for Social Development considered the regulations at its meetings of 26 February and 2 April 2009. The Committee understands that the amended rules are designed to improve and simplify child maintenance enforcement measures, thus ensuring that appropriate support is secured for children. The Committee endorses actions that require absent parents to live up to their responsibilities and to provide for their children. The Committee therefore recommends that the Assembly approve the Child Support and Social Security (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her explanation. Anything that improves the shambles that was previously the Child Support Agency (CSA) must be welcomed. As the Minister said, this is a tidying-up exercise that will increase the degree to which absent parents provide for their children and ensure that parents with care will not take the full burden for that.

Ms Lo: I support the motion to amend existing legislation through the regulations. We welcome anything that will help parents with caring responsibilities to obtain their full entitlement as they look after and bring up their children.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Members for their contributions to the debate and the Committee for Social Development for its support and endorsement. I agree that the changes that the regulations will make are about improving and simplifying child maintenance regulations to ensure that money flows in a timelier and more efficient manner to children who are in urgent need of it. The regulations are all about supporting those children. I hope that I have covered all the issues that were raised. Put simply, the Child Support and Social Security (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 make important but beneficial changes to the child support scheme.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Child Support and Social Security (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Civil Service: Equal Pay Claim

Mr Speaker: I advise Members that a substantial number of individual equal pay cases has been lodged with the Office of the Industrial Tribunals and the Fair Employment Tribunal (OITFET). I therefore warn Members that they must not refer to specific cases and must confine their remarks to the general topic of the motion. Should any Member disregard what I have said, I will immediately intervene. I know that Members are sometimes very inventive when they speak and end up straying outside the original motion. Let me say to the whole House that that will not happen this afternoon. In fact, if Members do that, I intend to ask the Member to take his or her seat, and I will move on to the next Member. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

12.15 pm

The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes in which to move 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 mover of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech.

Mr O'Loan: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the ongoing delay in settling the Civil Service equal pay claim; recognises that the staff affected were deprived of their proper remuneration over a period of years; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that all current and former Civil Service staff affected receive their back pay within three months.

I am mindful of the instructions that you have given, Mr Speaker, and I do not intend to cause you any difficulties.

I cannot support the amendment, as it would very much weaken the motion. This is a vital issue. There is a fundamental issue of fairness for 9,000 current and former civil servants, primarily in the administrative officer (AO), administrative assistant (AA) and executive officer 2 (EO2) grades. Those staff were deprived of pay to which they were entitled for many years. That is the fundamental point that we must not overlook.

The Government are the employer in this case. That puts a clear duty on the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Dodds, whose presence at this debate I welcome, to behave properly towards his employees. With respect to the Minister, I do not think that he has done so to date. The staff affected are predominantly

female and Catholic, groups that have historically been disadvantaged in the Civil Service.

Just over a year ago, the Finance Minister at the time, Peter Robinson, announced that he wished to achieve a negotiated settlement on the matter. He indicated that the cost of the settlement might exceed £100 million in back pay alone. A year later, there is no settlement and no sign of one. Staff and unions have been forced to lodge claims with an industrial tribunal, which they did in February.

On 13 May, Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) officials told the Committee for Finance and Personnel that they were meeting monthly with the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA), the main trade union involved. Monthly meetings — not much sign of urgency there. The union tells us that the process is extremely slow. There was not even one meeting between 7 April and 13 May, when the DFP officials came to meet the Committee. Staff have had to resort to public meetings in order to put their case.

An offer was to have been put on the table by Easter, but that did not happen. Instead, DFP told NIPSA that it needed to perform a comprehensive grading review of the Technical Grade 1 (TG1) and Technical Grade 2 (TG2) grades, an exercise for which it wanted a three-month period. Let us be clear about one thing: the industrial tribunal route is not the best for anyone. It will eat up money, and it will last for ever. Therefore, the Government must negotiate. There is an absolute onus on them to do so. They must bring a new sense of urgency to those negotiations.

The Department of Finance and Personnel tells us that the issue is about equal pay for work of equal value, with which I have no difficulty. Comparability of grades is absolutely at the heart of the negotiations. My difficulty is that that was obvious at the outset. When Peter Robinson put forward his indicative figure of £100 million, it was clearly an informed estimate. He and his departmental officials had done their homework. Some indication of the necessary comparisons was obviously present, and any exercises ought to have happened at once. We should not be announcing the start of a particular comparability exercise a year later.

I am also very concerned at the stance being taken by the director of central personnel group on a critical point. On 8 April 2009, he wrote to staff saying that he wanted to resolve the equal pay claims in a way that will minimise the impact on public services. I am certain that that is simply a repetition of Lord Denning's "appalling vista" argument: in other words, the outcome is so appalling that they will not go there, no matter whether it is right or wrong. That is fundamentally and deeply unfair to the staff concerned. The two matters must be dealt with separately. A

proper settlement must be made. Then and only then the financial implications of that settlement must be faced. The financial implications cannot form a legitimate part of the negotiations.

On 13 May 2009, when the Committee met DFP officials, I put that challenge to them, and I was much happier with the permanent secretary's response than with that of his director. The permanent secretary said:

"the implications of that for the public services, no matter what they may be, have to be considered, but considered as a separate issue."

I agree with him; that is the only just stance to take. However, his Minister does not agree. On 15 May 2009, the Minister was reported in the 'Belfast Telegraph' as saying that the £100 million back pay settlement could result in cuts in public services. That is nothing less than moral blackmail on 9,000 civil servants. The message from the Minister is, "Do not ask for your rights, or your colleagues could lose their jobs". Of course, those remarks came from a Minister who would not revise his Budget to address those or other pressures, as the SDLP has repeatedly asked him to do. Yet, he now says that civil servants' pressing for their legitimate pay claim will lead to further job cuts in the Civil Service.

There has been quite a bit of talk about £100 million being available. Indeed, when officials write to me and other Members they talk about the Minister having banked £100 million to deal with the problem. Let us be clear: the Minister has not banked any money to deal with the problem; he has no money to put in the bank to deal with it. Therefore, when people talk about £100 million, let us identify what they are talking about. The £100 million from Downing Street is not real; there is not one extra penny piece in the Northern Ireland block or in the Minister's budget to deal with this matter. All that is on offer is permission to use existing money, already allocated for other purposes, and to borrow more money that will have to be paid back, on top, of course, of the additional borrowings that must be paid back as a result of the Chancellor's recent Budget.

I wonder how all that looks from the perspective of the 9,000 civil servants, who are, of course, relatively low-paid officials? How do they feel when they have to negotiate for their rightful salary with senior civil servants, who face no delay when allocating themselves large bonuses? How do they feel when they recall Peter Robinson's promise to settle the matter and then look at his expenses claims? They have no second-home allowance or a £400-a-month food bonus. I do not think that they would be at all pleased with Peter Robinson's put-down remark about people not being happy until he is sleeping on a park bench. I do not see much likelihood that Peter Robinson will

end up sleeping on a park bench, nor do I think that he is losing much sleep over his 9,000 civil servants.

That is why I cannot accept the amendment —

Mr Storey: Given that hundreds of the Member's and my constituents will possibly lose their jobs in the next few months, will the Member advise the House how much sleep the Minister for Social Development has lost after abrogating her responsibilities with respect to the Egan contracts? Perhaps, the Member might be a bit more liberal with his explanation.

Mr Speaker: I warned the House that there would be a difficulty if Members were to stray outside the scope of the motion. Members are beginning to stray from the motion, so I strongly urge the Member who moved the motion, as well as those who intervene, to stay as much as possible within its scope.

Mr O'Loan: I have no difficulty with the intervention. The Member will, no doubt, join in the debate on our motion on that matter next week. I hope that, in the meantime, he will speak to his own Minister of Finance and Personnel about funding for the issue.

I cannot accept the amendment. I do not think that the civil servants will be pleased with the lack of support from the Democratic Unionist Party. The amendment does not even accept their case. It accepts the goodwill of the Minister, even when he patently has not worked to a timely resolution. It looks for a solution "as soon as possible", which might be never. I ask for the Assembly's support for the motion and its rejection of the amendment.

Mr Hamilton: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after the first "affected" and insert

"may have been deprived of their proper remuneration over a period of years; welcomes the commitment of the Minister of Finance and Personnel to resolving the issue and calls on him to ensure that all current and former Civil Service staff affected receive their back pay within three months or as soon as possible."

It is clear from the proposer's contribution that one of the objectives — perhaps the primary objective — of today's motion is not the resolution of the equal pay claim but rather the playing of party politics in the Chamber. More time was spent attacking the Minister, his party and his predecessor — the current First Minister — than on the critical issue of the equal pay claim.

I wholeheartedly support the principle of equal pay for work of equal value, as does the Finance Minister. That is clear from his public utterances. He is more than capable of speaking for himself, but I am confident that he will make his support for that principle clear when he speaks later. One can see from the Minister's actions that he is wholeheartedly supportive of that principle, as was his predecessor in the post, who initiated those actions. Indeed, it was a question from me to the previous Finance Minister that brought the matter of equal pay back into public light.

The Member who moved the motion is aware of the interest of individual Members, including me, in the issue. Therefore, to try to dismiss the interest of the current Minister, his predecessor or his party is to grossly distort the truth. We are deeply committed to seeing the principle of equal pay for work of equal value adhered to in the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

I understand the civil servants' frustration at the time that it takes to resolve the issue. I can sympathise with them for that. However, everyone involved should realise that the issue is extremely complex. If it were simple and straightforward, it would have been resolved a long time ago. There are a lot of reasons why it is not a simple or straightforward matter. We talk about notions of equal pay for work of equal value, but what does equal pay equate to? What is equal pay? There is no structure or format in place to define what equal pay relates to. The administrative staff to whom the mover of the motion referred are comparing themselves with those in technical grades TG1 and TG2, jobs that are being evaluated at present. I can understand that the job evaluation process adds to the frustration that the proposer spoke of, but it is absolutely necessary, if the claim is to be settled, that the foundations are firm and the figures are as correct as they can be. Therefore, a job re-evaluation is necessary. There is also the need for negotiations in the future with the Treasury on the matter or indeed within the Executive.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Let me finish. Whatever the resolution, it will have to be brought to the Executive. If the Minister is to make the case to his colleagues on the Executive, he needs to have firm and exact figures to go on. That is the need for the review. That is simple and straightforward.

Another obvious benefit of having a job re-evaluation is to end the matter, so that in the future there is no rigmarole over claims such as the current one, and so that everyone is on the same playing field and moving forward on that basis. I will now give way to the Member.

Mr O'Loan: Given his agreement with me that comparability is at the heart of the matter, can the Member explain why the exercise in comparability is only starting a full year after the Minister at the time, Peter Robinson, said that he wanted to settle?

Mr Hamilton: That is a question for the Member to put to the Minister. I am sure that the Minister has heard the question and that he can answer it. All that I can say is that I can see the logic behind the decision to have the exercise.

I wish that the Member would appreciate the logic in having comparability. If that requires a job re-evaluation, it is important that it is done. I am sure that

Mr O'Loan would not want some figure to be plucked out of thin air. The question of timing is for others to answer. I cannot do that; I am not the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

12.30 pm

Mr Storey: Not yet. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Hamilton: I am not blushing; it is the sun.

Mr Kennedy: The Member is showing an attractive modesty.

Mr Hamilton: In the circumstances, Mr Speaker, it might be a hospital pass.

There are other complexities, not least resources and budgetary implications. When Mr O'Loan moved the motion, he touched on those issues, and he is right: if someone has a right to equal pay, that right is absolute. However, there are clear budgetary and financial implications to the equal pay issue that render the motion ludicrous. The motion is not simply saying that the issue needs to be resolved or that there should be some agreement between both parties; it stipulates that the Minister of Finance and Personnel should ensure that:

“staff affected receive their back-pay within three months.”

If the figure is as high as has been estimated, that will be difficult to achieve. It is ludicrous to say that that can be achieved within three months.

There is access to £100 million, but the figure settled on could be much higher than that. By extension, there would be budgetary implications beyond that. Therefore, everyone involved — the staff, unions, Members and others — must be aware that the cost of settling the equal pay claim could be counterproductive for public services. That is a truism, and it stands to reason.

Mr Speaker and Mr O'Loan mentioned the individual equal pay cases that have been lodged with an industrial tribunal. They complicate the matter; the industrial tribunal and the lodging of thousands of cases do not help to resolve the issue in the quick manner in which the proposer of the motion, and the rest of us, would like.

I do not have an issue with most of the motion, but I disagree with setting a three-month deadline. It is crazy, ludicrous and barmy to set an arbitrary deadline by plucking a time frame out of thin air. I understand the frustrations of many in the House, and of civil servants particularly, but, in view of the complexities about which other Members and I have spoken, it is madness to pluck from thin air a time frame in which the equal pay issue must be resolved. It has taken one year to get to this point, and it could take another year to get all the work, including the job re-evaluation, done correctly, because it needs to be done thoroughly and properly. It is sheer madness, therefore, to say that the claim must be settled within three months. It puts

the Department in a poor position. If the Department takes on board the sentiments of the motion and opts for the requested tactic, why would the union want to negotiate? In those circumstances, the union would sit back and say that the Department has to come to it with a figure within three months. There is no incentive for a sensible negotiated settlement. It is so complex.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: I saw Mr O'Loan first, so I will give way to him.

Mr O'Loan: I want to point out an inconsistency in what Mr Hamilton says. He says that it is ludicrous to expect a settlement to be achieved within three months. However, his amendment calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that:

“all current and former Civil Service staff affected receive their back-pay within three months or as soon as possible.”

That suggests that Mr Hamilton thinks that it could be done within a three-month period. That is the kind of urgency that 9,000 civil servants and I want.

Mr Hamilton: The Member does not understand the difference between desirability and reality. If it were possible, I would like the issue to be settled in three days. However, the amendment is rooted in the real world. It gives the Minister the flexibility to go beyond three months to get it right, because there are many complex issues, and there are implications for future Budgets. It is an important issue, and we need to deal with it as urgently as possible, but we must also be realistic. I will give way to Mr Kennedy now.

Mr Kennedy: I was going to make the same point as Mr O'Loan.

Mr Hamilton: The issue must be sorted out, but it must be done on a proper and firm foundation. Hence the need for the job re-evaluation, beyond which there are also budgetary implications. We cannot try to shoehorn all the outstanding issues into three months. I would like the issue to be settled in three months, but we must be realistic; it could take considerably longer to get it right.

I would rather see the matter dealt with properly than have it rushed through for party political reasons and for the purposes of point scoring. I urge Members to support the amendment, which is realistic and rooted in the real world. We want the matter to be resolved as quickly as possible, but it must be resolved properly.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to take part in this important debate, and I thank the proposers of the motion for tabling it. Sinn Féin supports the motion and opposes the amendment.

The equal pay issue is a legacy of the direct rule era and has emerged as a consequence of the equality legislation that was introduced in 1976. Although Sinn Féin sees the matter as one for which the British Treasury has overall responsibility, the Assembly and Executive must deal with it now rather than wait until negotiations between the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the British Treasury are completed.

As Members mentioned, last year, the then Minister of Finance and Personnel, Peter Robinson, gave a commitment that the matter would be resolved and that the £100 million that would be needed to settle it could be found. In February of this year, the current Minister of Finance and Personnel, Nigel Dodds, and the permanent secretary of the Department of Finance and Personnel met the trade union NIPSA and agreed to resolve the issue before Easter. It is now June, and there has still been no resolution.

The reason that the departmental officials have given for the delay is that that they have now recommended to the trade unions that there should be a comprehensive review of technical grades 1 and 2. Many people view that as a stalling tactic because it is clear that the engagement between the Department and the unions does not reflect the earlier commitments given by both the previous and current Minister of Finance and Personnel. As a result of the delay, NIPSA has initiated a number of industrial tribunal complaints. Mr Speaker, I know that you referred to those cases earlier, so I will not go into that. However, in all probability, they will take years to conclude and will involve huge costs.

Discussions with the Treasury have secured no additional finance, and although I said that the equal pay issue stems from the direct rule era and is the Treasury's responsibility, it is still incumbent on the Executive to resolve the issue and to give people the money to which they are entitled. After all, that is what the issue is about: giving people what they are entitled to.

We have heard of other problems in the Civil Service, including the under-representation of particular groups at certain levels. In particular, women and Catholics are under-represented at the higher grades, while young Protestant males are under-represented at the lower grades. It is estimated that almost 13,000 civil servants, mostly women and Catholics, are entitled to receive payments that have not been made to them through the years.

The 20% gap in pay between men and women might not be closed for another 30 years or more, in spite of decades of equal pay legislation. Women are still being treated differently from men as regards pay. The equal pay issue mainly affects women who were routinely denied promotion opportunities and, therefore, mostly occupy the lower grades. Sinn Féin believes that

responsibility for reimbursing those affected through loss of earnings as a result of discriminatory practices lies with the British Treasury, but it believes that the matter needs to be resolved now; many of the civil servants affected have retired and should not have to wait until the British Treasury and the Minister of Finance and Personnel reach an agreement. I call on the Minister to take the measures he feels necessary to reach a conclusion as a matter of urgency. Sinn Féin supports the principle of equal pay for equal work.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this important debate. The Ulster Unionist Party recognises the importance of the equal pay issue and of fair pay for all people. The issue has been batted around for some time, and I imagine that all Members have received many letters and representations about it, so it is therefore important that it is resolved as quickly as possible.

The UUP has strong criticisms of the way in which the Department of Finance and Personnel has handled this issue. Over a year ago, the then Finance Minister, who is now the First Minister, used what might be described as political opportunism to highlight the issue of the equal pay claims. However, it appears that when he or his officials considered the issue, they could do nothing about it, or else they have done insufficient work to resolve it.

That proves the old adage that talk is cheap. Talk allows for purely speculative figures to be carelessly tossed around; talk does not, it appears, require negotiation with the trade unions; talk does not require money to be pulled out of thin air; and talk, somehow, does not require difficult decisions to be made. The First Minister has put the current Finance Minister into quite a big hole by rushing into an announcement that neither he, nor his Department, nor the Executive were ready for.

We need some clarification on the DUP amendment. The motion calls for back pay to be issued within three months, and the amendment confirms the desirability of that. However, when proposing the amendment, Mr Hamilton moved some way from indicating a clear expectation that the issue would be resolved within three months. This is an opportunity for the Minister to confirm that it is his goal to resolve the issue within three months, and we look forward to the Minister confirming that, either by intervention now, or in his ministerial response later in the debate. I see that the Minister is not rising to speak at the moment.

When the First Minister, Mr Robinson, was the Minister of Finance, he declared that resolving the issue was a matter of moral obligation to those civil servants who are affected. That has been subsequently repeated by his successor, and I wholeheartedly agree with that. The Civil Service has underpaid many of its

staff over many years, and, as a result, there is a moral obligation to compensate them for that loss. However, there are other issues involved, including issues of grading, pension liabilities and, of course, expense. We need to see clearly what the cost will be and whether any consideration of the matter, or any plan for dealing with it, has been included in the comprehensive spending review. We suspect that it has not; therefore, we have yet another mess to deal with.

All of that leaves us in a very uncertain position. We need clarity as quickly as possible. We need detailed costings and a clear indication to the civil servants involved — some of whom are now retired, and some are still working — that when Departments or Ministers make promises, those promises will be fulfilled. This Thursday, civil servants will have the opportunity to tell the DUP what they really think of its “government by press release”, and they may well take that opportunity.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party is willing to support the motion; however, I must stress that we will not resolve this issue on the Floor of the Assembly, through this, or any other, debate. The issue can be addressed only through a process of negotiations, which is preferable, or, ultimately, through a legal process. The Assembly is not qualified to give a clear determination of what the outcome should be; that is a matter for specialists in human resources to work out, and if there is a proper method for doing so, it should be followed.

Our purpose today has two aspects. The first is to give a clear statement that, when back pay is due on the basis of equal pay, and given that promises have been made, those promises will be honoured and followed through. Indeed, some Members said that that promise has been given already. To be fair, I think that we are all united on that principle; the timescale and the process are perhaps dividing us.

Flowing from that, the second point is the need to reflect the frustration at the delays.

12.45 pm

Mr O’Loan: The Member said that he thinks that we are all agreed on a commitment to that promise. Does he share my concern that the officials’ statement, which is amplified by the Minister’s comments on the potential impact that the matter will have on the public services, indicates that that is to be a factor in the negotiations? Therefore, does he agree that there is an attempt to not honour the commitment that the Minister of Finance and Personnel gave — on the face of it — a year ago?

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

Dr Farry: I am grateful for the intervention, and I have a few things to say in response. First, I am slightly uneasy at how the Member who moved the motion played off the civil servants’ statements against one another vis-à-vis the Minister. It is fair to take what one Minister said and contrast that with what another Minister, possibly his successor, said. That is part and parcel of the political and scrutiny process. Civil servants are not here to answer for themselves. More to the point, Ministers speak on behalf of Departments, whereas civil servants speak on behalf of Ministers and not as individuals. That is an important point.

Secondly, and more substantively, this is an inescapable bid. Equal pay legislation is in place, and, ultimately, it is within that framework that the issue will be resolved, as well as the question of whether it will go, finally, to an industrial tribunal. We can play politics and talk about the implications on the Budget, but the money will have to be addressed in one shape or another. It is important that we do not get fixated on the notion of £100 million as though a pot with that sum existed to be divided up in some shape or form. Whatever will be, will be. The sum may be less than £100 million, or it could be more. We will have to follow the logic and see where it takes us.

However, the money is not sitting here in an account. I stand to be corrected on this point, but I understand that the Northern Ireland Executive can draw down that money from the Treasury for a range of purposes, including possibly using it to address the equal pay liability that the Assembly inherited. I want the Assembly to focus on economic recovery and on investing in new resources that may come our way so that our overall economy can be improved. However, it is frustrating that, whenever we get additional resources, we have to go back and deal with legacy issues or inefficiencies in our system. As a consequence, Northern Ireland is missing out on many opportunities. However, that is a wider debate for another day.

The point was made earlier that the people who are suffering as a result of the situation tend to be the lower-paid civil servants. There is, quite rightly, a strong critique from many quarters about the size and nature of the public sector in Northern Ireland, its unsustainability, and public-sector pay versus private-sector pay. It is worth stressing that the pay for lower grades in the public sector is often less than that for equivalent posts in the private sector. However, in the upper reaches of the Civil Service, the opposite is true, in that public-sector pay is often better than equivalent private-sector pay. Consequently, we have a certain degree of economic crowding out. There is also frustration at the bonus culture in the Civil Service, and, on that point, we are talking about apples and oranges: equal pay is a different concept to the whole

notion of bonuses, so perhaps we can discuss bonuses at some stage.

Jennifer McCann referred to the equal pay issue affecting people from the Catholic tradition disproportionately, especially women. That may be true. However, it is worth pointing out that the issue affects a range of people across society, including male Protestants and female Catholics; it may just be skewed in one direction. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind the fact that the issue affects all constituencies, and, no doubt, Members have had that reflected in their mailbags.

The Assembly needs to give a clear message of intent as to what should be done, and, preferably, that that should be done quickly and within the three-month timetable that has been set out. This is not a binding resolution. Ultimately, the process needs to take its course but with some degree of urgency.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

I support the motion, and I will explain why we oppose the amendment. We understand the difficulties that are presented by the equal pay claim. The SDLP's motion sets a time limit of three months for its resolution. Mr Hamilton said that it was unrealistic to expect the pay claim to be resolved and for the money to be in the hands of the civil servants within that time.

Sinn Féin does not approach the issue naively. We understand that it will be a very difficult one. The reason we decided to support the motion and not the amendment is that —

Mr Weir: Is it because an election is coming up?

Mr O'Dowd: No. I was about to explain when someone called out.

There is a simple reason why we support it. To date, the matter has not been handled properly. For us to support an amendment that says "as soon as possible" or thereafter gives licence for the matter not to be dealt with properly in the future. A spotlight must be shone into the dark recesses of DFP, which makes those in that Department, from the Minister down, aware that the Assembly and its elected representatives expect the matter to be dealt with properly.

It is clear that the interaction between DFP and the trade unions that represent the civil servants has not been adequate or efficient. The last-minute cancellation of meetings between DFP and NIPSA, which have been reported, do not create a working atmosphere wherein NIPSA can believe that DFP is dealing properly with the matter and that it will be resolved. That is why Sinn Féin does not support the amendment and why it supports the SDLP motion.

After three or four decades of unequal pay, it is time that the matter was brought to an end. A figure of £100 million is discussed, but the bill could reach £400 million by the time it is resolved. However, that is a decision that the Executive will have to make, and a commitment that they will have to live up to. As with all political decisions, the implications of taking it will be serious.

Will the Minister let us know to what level of detail he has negotiated this with the British Treasury? From an answer to a question for written answer, I learned that he was last in contact with the British Treasury about the matter in November 2008. That is not good enough. The Minister should be beating down the door of the British Treasury to demand assistance in resolving the issue. The British Government started off the process of unequal pay; their Ministers presided over it for four decades; and they have a moral, political and financial responsibility to ensure that the money due to those workers is paid.

In recent times, a civil servant who works 30 hours a week in the local jobcentre arrived in my office. She showed me her payslip. She brings home less than £900 a month, out of which she has to pay child-minding and all the other expenses of a working mother. I was aghast when I learned that she had worked in the civil service for 20 years and yet brought home so little. Those matters must be resolved urgently.

Dr Farry was correct when he said that the matter will not be sorted out on the Floor of the Assembly. The frustration of the civil servants affected has brought it here. The announcement was made in a fanfare of publicity on 15 May 2008. Had the matter been dealt with properly since then, and those women workers who are particularly affected believed that the issue was being taken seriously by politicians, it would not have arrived on the Floor of the Assembly. It is regrettable that the House may divide on the SDLP motion, because that motion sends out a clear message to senior managers in DFP, the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the thousands of civil servants affected that the Assembly and Executive take the matter seriously and that it will be resolved. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P Ramsey: As Danny Kennedy said, I am sure that every representative here has had doorstep discussions and has received letters and e-mails recently about the case for equality of pay across clerical and technical grades in the Civil Service. The affected civil servants have been very patient and tolerant until now because they expect to be treated with a bit of fairness.

The system is wrong, unfair and unjust for a lot of people. Many civil servants work in this Building to serve us daily; however, they are suffering from low morale and are not as motivated as they should be. We

have a duty of care to bring the issue to the Chamber. The motion is not a political stunt, and we are not trying to pull a wee stroke. Rather, the motion is saying that we support thousands of people in their claim for equal pay, whether they work in the Social Security Agency, Parliament Buildings or a Department. If things are wrong, they are wrong, and we are here to legislate and to ensure that the situation improves.

NIPSA argues that it has a convincing legal case for equality in pay scales and that clerical workers who are on an equivalent grade to technical grades, and whose work is of equal value, should be paid equally. That makes sense. The dispute has been going on too long.

I am concerned about the language used in the amendment that Simon Hamilton proposed. The amendment says that the staff affected:

“may have been deprived of their proper remuneration”.

I want Mr Hamilton to explain to the 9,000 civil servants who are waiting on backdated money how they “may have been” unjustly treated, because I think that it is very clear that they have been unjustly treated. The issue of equality in pay scales should be resolved. We have every right to give the Minister a mandate to pursue the issue and to fast-track the process.

Mr Hamilton: Is the Member saying that there should be no robustness in any settlement and that we should simply pay whatever we can give, or pluck a figure out of mid-air, or accept whatever figure the union offers first? Is he also saying that the rigidity of a figure should not be tested and that there is no need for job re-evaluations to compare the grades of administration staff with those of technical staff in order to correct the system and ensure that it is right and proper? I thought that his colleague Mr O’Loan had acceded to that point earlier in the debate. Is Mr Ramsey now saying something different?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute to speak.

Mr P Ramsey: No, I certainly am not. Undoubtedly, the process must be clean and clinical; however, it has taken too damn long. The money from the equal pay claims could improve the quality of life of the civil servants who have been off work over the past few years due to ill health or disabilities. That is what they have been saying too.

It is understood that this is an historical problem that dates back to the late 1990s when the union first raised the issue with management. Given that previous Administrations failed to deal with the problem effectively, the cost of settling is getting higher by the year.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Ramsey: I have already given way once.

The Minister needs to settle the case by taking control and by insisting that it be resolved. Given that any back pay may cover periods of direct rule, can the Minister make the case that the British Exchequer is responsible for at least some of that cost? Perhaps the Minister will address that point when responding to the debate.

The SDLP welcomes the previous commitments made by the former Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Robinson, and his successor, Mr Dodds, that the pay claim will be resolved. A number of Members made the point that meetings were called and then abandoned at short notice. The Department has not honoured its commitments or acted in good faith. NIPSA members have been carrying out such a detailed and intensive campaign, because they are fed up and are sick, sore and tired of the promises to resolve the matter that DFP has made.

Will the Minister confirm whether, as I have been told, the management side did not have the authority of direction to deal with the back pay issue during the discussions, and, therefore, it was unable to deliver the commitments that the then Minister made, leaving us without a solution 12 months on?

1.00 pm

I understand that negotiations will begin again on 4 June 2009, which is ironic, and a happy coincidence for the Minister, as it is also the date of the elections to the European Parliament. I hope that he will confirm that management side will have the authority to negotiate on all the issues that must be resolved.

I agree with Simon Hamilton that there must be a very clear process, but, for heaven’s sake, let us get down to brass tacks. Let the Minister take control of the matter and instruct his officials to resolve it. That is why the proposers of the motion have asked for the issue to be resolved in the next three months. Let Simon Hamilton and the DUP explain to the voters that although many of them are civil servants, equal pay can be placed on as long a finger as he and the party want.

I hope that there is no division on the issue today. The Assembly must send out a message of solidarity and support to the thousands of people affected by the issue — many of whom are our constituents — that it wants the matter resolved this side of Christmas.

I appeal to the Minister to do everything in his power to guarantee that commitments will be honoured and that negotiations will be approached with resolve to bring the pay issue to a conclusion. Will he also confirm that a deadline exists by which the matter must be resolved to everyone’s satisfaction?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I share the concerns expressed by Members that the Department should bring matters to a conclusion as quickly as possible. However, the scale

and complexity of the issues involved mean that the Department must resolve them in a manner that is compatible with its legal obligation, fully informed by the facts, and that ensures a fair and robust pay and grading structure for the future.

The motion refers to a single claim for equal pay, but Members should be aware that there are thousands of individual claims and that many of those involved are not represented by the union. The matter is now the subject of legal process in an industrial tribunal and is the subject of intense negotiations between my officials and NIPSA. Therefore, I am somewhat restricted in what I can say. However, I make it absolutely clear that there has been no backtracking on, or withdrawing of, any commitments given in relation to the equal pay issue in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. I stand by statements that I have made on the matter, and rather than any question of the process being stalled, I have instructed my officials to work intensively to resolve the matter as early as possible. However, Members must recognise that the issues involved are complex and that more work must be done before we are in a position to bring matters to a conclusion.

The Civil Service carries out diverse work, and the jobs of the staff who carry out that work are also diverse: they include administrators, lawyers, accountants, statisticians, engineers, vehicle inspectors, driving examiners, and many others. That range of jobs provides such a sizeable employer with a significant, if not unique, challenge in ensuring compliance with the Equal Pay Act, or, put simply, equal pay for work of an equal value. We all stand by and support that principle, but given the diversity in the Civil Service, it is immensely complicated to uphold.

As several Members said today, the issue facing the Northern Ireland Civil Service is not new. That there is disparity in pay between technical staff, most of whom are male, and administrative staff, the greater proportion of whom are female, did not emerge suddenly in the past two or three years; rather, it has been evident for a number of decades, and it was an issue when members of other parties held the position of Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Pay and grading was delegated to the Northern Ireland Civil Service in 1996, and it inherited a system that included disparity in pay between the administrative and technical grades. There has never been a comprehensive job evaluation exercise conducted in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, and the Department simply does not have the reliable, up-to-date data that it requires to bring that process forward. For that reason, and only that reason, an urgent job evaluation of technical grade posts is being undertaken. The Department cannot rely on information that is less than comprehensive and is out of date.

The issues that the Department is working hard to resolve were inherited from direct rule Ministers. However, the Executive and all the Ministers in the Executive must contribute to dealing with the issues, and we are determined that all the issues will be dealt with once and for all. We are also determined to establish pay and grading arrangements for civil servants that will ensure that we are not in this position again.

Contrary to what was alleged, DFP has dealt with the issue openly and transparently. It will be a matter for the Executive, and they will have to deal with all the ramifications.

For all those reasons, I have instructed officials to work with the trade union to establish whether a negotiated settlement to the issue is possible. When I met NIPSA representatives, they confirmed that they are also committed to that approach and that they will work with my officials to try to achieve that objective.

Neither the Department nor the trade union can ignore the fact that, as I said, several thousand claims have been made by staff to the Office of the Industrial Tribunals and the Fair Employment Tribunal. Those claims will now proceed through the tribunal process until such times as a determination is reached or they are withdrawn by the claimants. That reality is something that we will also need to consider in our continuing discussions with NIPSA. That is why it is difficult, if not impossible, to lay down a timescale within which a resolution can be achieved. Some aspects that are relevant to the tribunal are outside the Executive's control.

Mr F McCann: What would happen were a civil servant to pass away while waiting for his or her claim to come through? Does the claim die with the claimant, or can the claimant's immediate family take it up?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: People will need to take legal advice on such matters. For the reason that the Speaker gave, I do not wish to discuss individual cases. The Member's question highlights the fact that the issue does not concern one simple, single claim but the claims of thousands of people in different circumstances, some of whom are members of the union and some of whom are not.

One reason why it is difficult, if not impossible, to resolve the issue in three months is that there are matters over which we have no control. People cannot be forced to withdraw a claim from an industrial tribunal. If someone not belonging to the trade union were to decide to pursue a claim, their case would not be settled within three months. Therefore, we must be careful, especially during a process of negotiation, about setting absolute deadlines by which time issues must be resolved. Such matters are not only outside the control of the Executive but of NIPSA.

Work is under way. I am determined that there will be no undue or unreasonable delay on DFP's part, and I believe that the union is determined that there will be no delays on its side. Complex issues of law and of fact must be examined and considered in detail. That work has been going on, and it will continue. It must be recognised that even if a resolution to the issue were agreed today, a major logistical exercise would still need to be undertaken. The trade union would have to ballot its members, and, after that, every member of staff concerned, whether a trade union member or not, would have to confirm that they were content to comply with the terms of any offer.

My Department stands by the commitments that have been given, but the issue is complicated. My reference to the three-month deadline is not intended to signal a desire not to resolve the issue as quickly and as sensibly as possible, but it is simply not feasible, logical or sensible to set that kind of deadline. It is simply not the case that there has been a delay in the efforts to seek a resolution to the matter, and work has now started on reviewing technical grades.

I am determined to see the matter resolved. When I met NIPSA representatives on 7 May 2009, I took the opportunity to reaffirm directly to them my commitment and that of the Executive to addressing the issue. The issue will come to the Executive through a negotiated settlement if that is possible, and NIPSA representatives confirmed that they wished to have a negotiated settlement. I assure the House of my commitment to that.

As has been said, in these difficult and challenging days, we must be certain that all expenditure decisions have a firm foundation. The review of technical grades is designed precisely to provide such assurance. If we go to Treasury, and we have not done that work, the first thing that it is likely to tell us is to go away and do it. The Treasury will ask us where on earth is our basis for asking for more finance when we have not conducted that robust test of what we are actually liable for. It is common sense. To put ourselves in any other position would be to denude us of any argument that we have with Treasury, accepting that the matter is a legacy that has been left to the Executive from many decades of direct rule. Matters have not been delayed, therefore. On the contrary, a dedicated team has been established and is progressing that urgent work as I speak. I confirm to trade union representatives that discussions with officials can and must proceed in parallel with the review.

Dealing with that particular matter will not be the end of the work that is planned by the Department of Finance and Personnel. It has put in place plans for a much more comprehensive review of pay and grading throughout the Northern Ireland Civil Service. That is a major long-term exercise. It will ensure that in future, everyone can be confident that the Civil Service's pay

and grading arrangements meet its business needs; that it attracts and retains the staff that it needs; and that, overall, whatever an employee's grade or discipline might be, the Civil Service, as an employer, demonstrates truly that equal pay is paid for work of equal value. I stand by that commitment. I believe that the House stands by that commitment. It is right that it does so.

Mr Weir: Although I welcome the debate, one has a degree of suspicion about its timing, which may be motivated by events at the end of the week, rather than by the ongoing issue itself.

After all — as, I believe, Pat Ramsey pointed out — not only does the issue go back several decades, it was brought to the attention of Government and, indeed, management in 1996. The proposers of the motion want to see a settlement during a three-month window. If I were to indulge in the cheap political point-scoring that was attempted by the Member who moved the motion, I could point out that, during the time since the problem was brought to management's attention, not only was nothing done to correct it during the two or three years when it was under the SDLP's watch in the Department of Finance and Personnel, it was allowed to fester. Indeed, the problem partly originates from that period and not purely from direct rule. However, that is the type of cheap political point-scoring in which I do not intend to indulge today.

As has been pointed out, the issue is, obviously, complex and has been ongoing for some time. If the equal pay issue were unique to the Northern Ireland Civil Service, perhaps it could be argued that the Executive are dragging their heels. However, that is not the case: the matter affects a number of Departments throughout the United Kingdom. It is not unique to Northern Ireland. Indeed, some Members have seen it at local level. Therefore, it is not even unique to central Government.

A vast number of equal pay claims have dragged on for many years. They have caused difficulties between employers and trade unions. One reason why there has been a degree of slowness on the issue is because, on certain occasions when there have been equal pay settlements in local government, trade unions have been sued by members who felt that their settlements were not right. Therefore, there is natural caution.

Of course, none of that will be of any great comfort to those who seek equal pay. However, a negotiation process is under way. Indeed, it has been intense. During the past year, 17 meetings have taken place. It is not appropriate that we discuss the details of that negotiation today, save to say that the picture that has been presented by several Members is not wholly accurate. The confidentiality of negotiations between the trade union and the Department should be respected.

We must remember that both sides agreed to the individual assessment and to the comprehensive job evaluation. Indeed, the process to reach a negotiated settlement was suggested by both sides.

1.15 pm

We should not present the situation as the Minister or the Department trying to impose something on people; it is part of an overall process. It is important to ensure that we reach a solution that is fair and equitable to everyone. Consequently, the process may take a certain amount of time. Although the issue must be resolved as quickly as possible, we must get it right so that people who, in the past, have not been treated as well as they should have been receive their just rewards. Moreover, that will ensure a robust system that we can stand over in future, so that the Assembly will not have to consider its mistakes in five or 10 years and try to correct equal pay issues.

We need to make a commitment. The Executive have faced up to their responsibilities. The £100 million to which we now have access did not appear under direct rule or any previous Executive, and that is an indication of our intent. The key point, as Stephen Farry said, is that we need to send a strong message of intent that the process must be concluded as quickly and as fairly as possible. The Minister said that there is acceptance that the issue will be settled on the basis of equal pay, and that the money will be paid.

As I said, one must question the motivations behind the timing of the motion. However, the DUP will not make a political football of this issue. We have listened to Members' comments, we will not seek to divide the House and will not move our amendment. Although some people might try to project unrealistic expectations of the timescale for conclusions on the issue, we will accept the motion.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the change of heart from the DUP, which used most of its contributions to the debate to make accusations of political point-scoring. However, the reality is that, a year ago, its own Minister said in a fanfare of publicity that equal pay claims must be settled, without any clear guidance on when or how to do so. Therefore, today's debate is a direct consequence of the political statements and political point-scoring of a Minister from Mr Weir's party.

Mr Weir: Can the Member provide me with any quotations from the period when Mark Durkan and Seán Farren held the post of Minister of Finance and Personnel to demonstrate what they did about the matter? The matter had already been brought to their attention, because Pat Ramsey said that it was raised with management in 1996. What action did those members of her party take to end the problem of unequal pay in the Civil Service? Did they allow the system to

continue or did they take action? They clearly did not resolve the issue.

Mrs D Kelly: I am unsure whether that was an intervention or a speech, but I am happy to address the point.

On 1 December 2008, in response to a question for oral answer asked by Mr Durkan, the Minister of Finance of Personnel said:

“during previous periods of devolution, the Executive took measures to try to address the issue. That stopped when direct rule returned”. — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 35, p349, col 2*].

The Executive in question were led by the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists. Therefore, the matter — [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs D Kelly: The previous Executive addressed the matter. However, we all know about the stop-go nature of the previous Executive when the DUP used a revolving door. People did not get much time to address the issues, and we did not accept the three-month deadline. That matter arose in response to NIPSA, when the management side of the Civil Service said that the review would be completed in three months. That commitment has already been made to NIPSA. Therefore, why can it not be done in three months?

As have other Members, I will try to place the debate in context. Mr O'Dowd said that he met a person who had worked in the jobs and benefits office in Lurgan for almost 30 years. I met someone who has worked in such a post for 29 years. Her take-home pay is £933 a month. Her top line is less than £12,000 a year.

The six years' back pay will date from six years before a settlement is reached; therefore, a year's delay makes a huge difference. If Mr Robinson had settled the issue last year, civil servants could have expected back pay from 2002; if it is settled this year, it will date from 2003. Every year that the settlement is delayed means that the back pay will be paid from a later date.

Other Members referred to bonus payments, and the Minister said that he would look at pay and grading across the Civil Service. Not only do senior civil servants award themselves bonuses, but many of them leave the Civil Service — some in their early to mid fifties — and come back as consultants. In fact, over the past three or four years, such consultants have earned hundreds of thousands of pounds, although, interestingly enough, only one woman returned to the Civil Service as a consultant. As Ms McCann said, women are under-represented at senior levels of the pay scale in the Civil Service.

Many Members rightly called Civil Service back pay a legacy issue. However, although British direct rule Ministers flew in and out of the North, civil servants ran the North for many years. In fact, many may blame the senior Civil Service for not dealing

with the issue and for not guiding British Ministers to resolve the equal pay claim earlier.

There have been discrepancies over many years. As Ms McCann and other Members said, 60% of the disadvantaged section of the workforce consists of women, many of whom are Catholic. However, others are right to point out, as Dr Farry did, that not all of them are from the Catholic community; people of all age groups have been adversely affected by the inequalities.

Mr Ramsey pointed out that there is a duty of care to thousands of people who have a basic right to equality. The SDLP supports those people's fight for equal treatment. I welcome the Minister's restatement of his commitment to equal pay for work of equal value.

Although the Minister responded for approximately 11 minutes, we learned nothing new. We heard much about the legal process that faces us and about the robust nature of the settlement process. No one denies that it should be robust, but it has taken more than a few months for this debate to arise. There are established practices, here and elsewhere. The motion called for a time line and a date for settlement. Given that the DUP and Sinn Féin will not allow a discussion of the Budget and the current status of the Programme for Government, it is difficult to see how the matter will be dealt with.

At the meeting of the Committee for Finance and Personnel on the Northern Ireland Civil Service equal pay claim on 13 May, Ms Purvis asked Mr Baker, a departmental official:

"Do you see the equal pay issue being resolved within the current Assembly's lifetime?"

To which Mr Baker answered:

"we hope to resolve the matter as quickly as possible. I will not set a firm target. However, given that the current mandate of the Assembly lasts until 2011, I hope that the issue will be resolved before then."

That is simply not good enough for the many men and women who take home less in pay than some take home in benefits.

I do not know whether Members have spoken to staff in income support and benefits offices, but I have. A civil servant told me that under the changes that the British Prime Minister tried to introduce to help the economy, staff are making decisions on mortgage relief for second homes in Spain for some people who unfortunately find themselves out of work. The civil servant told me that civil servants had to decide whether to pay £1,000 a week in benefits while staff in the benefits office take home less than £1,000 a month for a full working week.

Something is wrong with the system. Parity is not within the Assembly's gift, but we can help those who are most in need. Civil servants who receive the lowest rates of pay need our support.

Pat Ramsey rightly pointed out that staff morale must be improved. Cheques are being issued to people who appear to be well-heeled but who are going through a difficult time and are in receipt of benefits. What incentive do those people have to get up and go to work in the mornings?

Mr O'Loan said that fairness is the central issue. That is the bottom line. The trade unions and many staff feel that the grading issue represents a shifting of the goalposts. The terms of reference for the equal pay negotiations should have been clearly set out and understood at the beginning of that process.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel was careful not to tie this issue to potential cuts to public services. Unfortunately — or, perhaps, fortunately — Mr Hamilton let the cat out of the bag in that respect. However, Mr O'Loan dealt with that issue quite well when he said that the principle of fairness should not be tied to its financial implications. The issue is one of correcting a wrong and of affording equality to civil servants who work long, hard hours, interface directly with the public and often work in stressful and anxious circumstances. We all know that many jobs and benefits offices have had to install security measures because staff have, at times, been threatened by members of the public. Surely, one thing that we can do is to give those civil servants some level of financial security.

I am disappointed that the Minister did not provide a time frame for the completion of the equal pay negotiations. I wonder whether Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness, when they meet the Prime Minister to put the case for the members of the Presbyterian Mutual Society, will also press for equal pay for civil servants.

Mr Weir: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the ongoing delay in settling the Civil Service equal pay claim; recognises that the staff affected were deprived of their proper remuneration over a period of years; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that all current and former Civil Service staff affected receive their back-pay within three months.

Mr Speaker: Question Time is due to begin at 2.30 pm. The sitting is suspended until that time.

The sitting was suspended at 1.28 pm.

On resuming —

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

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Child Protection

1. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on any work ongoing on a North/South basis in relation to child protection, and for an update on work with the NIO in relation to harmonising arrangements for the supervision of registered sex offenders. (AQO 2831/09)

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): In February 2008, the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in plenary format requested that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs establish and co-chair a cross-border group of officials from relevant Departments to intensify co-operation on child protection. That was discussed subsequently at the NSMC meeting in health and food safety sectoral format in May 2008, when it was noted that a co-ordinated group led by senior officials had been established to take the matter forward. That group meets twice yearly to discuss child protection issues, and the next meeting is scheduled to take place on 5 June 2009.

Five subgroups have been established to take forward specific initiatives jointly in areas such as vetting and barring, research, Internet safety, media awareness and the movement of children. The subgroups meet regularly to keep one another updated on ongoing developments in the respective jurisdictions.

Joint work is ongoing to develop a number of leaflets to provide child protection advice and guidance to parents, carers, employers and anyone who is concerned about a child. Consideration is being given also to the development of a joint protocol for the exchange of information about the movement of vulnerable families and children between the two jurisdictions. Discussions are under way to explore existing research links and networks, North and South, and models of good practice. Discussions on evolving vetting and barring arrangements in both jurisdictions are also continuing.

The junior Ministers wrote to Minister Paul Goggins on 23 May 2008, asking him to encourage his officials to work collaboratively with their counterparts in the Irish Government on progressing cross-border arrangements for sex offenders. The junior Ministers asked to be kept informed of progress. They met Minister Goggins again on 4 September 2008 and were briefed on developments on improving communication and consistency of arrangements on both sides of the border. The junior Ministers also asked that NIO officials should liaise with the chief social services officer to keep him involved of any developments in North/South alignment on the management of sex offenders.

Junior Minister Kelly had a follow-up meeting with Minister Goggins on 20 April 2009 at which he was updated on the improved public protection arrangements here and on the Irish Government's consultation document on the management of convicted sex offenders, which proposes innovations that will improve alignment of assessment and management arrangements, North and South.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend the First Minister and deputy First Minister on their personal commitment to child protection. The deputy First Minister's answer has given a comprehensive overview of what is happening.

Child protection cuts across various Departments and is an issue across the island. It is multi-faceted. The deputy First Minister has given us a brief update, but I am conscious that the next meeting about child protection is on 5 June, which is only a couple of days away. Will Members be updated following the meeting?

The deputy First Minister: The group meets to discuss child protection issues twice yearly. Five subgroups have been established, all of which comprise officials from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Health Service Executive and other areas in the Irish Government. Non-governmental organisations, North and South, such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC), Barnardo's and Action for Children are represented on the media awareness subgroup.

Membership of the vetting and barring subgroup includes officials from the Department of Education, AccessNI, the Garda central vetting unit, PSNI, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and the Department of Education and Science. The research subgroup has identified researchers, North and South, and will seek input from universities, the Commissioner for Children and Young People, the Ombudsman for Children's office in the South, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), and key voluntary organisations.

The movement of children subgroup has established a small working group comprising social work practitioners, North and South. The media awareness subgroup is jointly developing a series of child protection advice and guidance leaflets aimed at parents, carers, employers and the general public.

In recognition of the different legislative and legal systems, North and South, there will probably be an overarching A5 leaflet that will contain high-level dos and don'ts that are designed to signpost the reader towards the various services and organisations that have respective jurisdictions.

Work is also under way on a draft communiqué and communications strategy. The movement of children subgroup is considering what advice and guidance exist to deal with vulnerable children and families who move between jurisdictions. The vetting and barring subgroup has discussed vetting and barring arrangements in each jurisdiction. Northern participants discussed in detail vetting and barring arrangements under the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults Order 2003 and the Education (Prohibition from Teaching or Working with Children) Regulations 2007.

Discussions then moved to the new vetting and barring scheme that is being implemented under the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Order 2007, and there was a strong focus on shared learning. Particular emphasis was placed on the elements of the new scheme that are intended to prevent the exploitation of jurisdictional borders by individuals who are considered unsuitable to work with children and vulnerable adults. Also included in that is the recognition of foreign offences, foreign orders and equivalent barred lists. Southern participants outlined proposals for a new legislative vetting and barring regime in line with the recommendations of the relevant Oireachtas Committee.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response. However, concern has been expressed to me about the allocation of Housing Executive and housing association properties. Have there been any North/South discussions on that issue, particularly on the allocation of houses that are close to schools to people who are on the sex offenders list? That issue has come to my attention in the past two months with regard to the area that I represent. What measures are in place to prevent people on the sex offenders list being allocated houses that are close to schools?

The deputy First Minister: As the Assembly knows, the management of sex offenders is not a devolved matter; the NIO has been working with its counterparts in the Irish Government to streamline arrangements on the issue. As I said, the junior Ministers have been monitoring developments both through correspondence and regular meetings with the Minister of State, Paul Goggins.

I have no doubt that the Member's legitimate concerns are being dealt with on an ongoing basis. We all understand absolutely the importance of getting right our approach to the protection of young people and vulnerable adults. If we needed any reminders of how important that work is, we have had enough in the past few weeks, given the incredible revelations about what happened in the past on this island, and not just in the South. We must all understand that, as time progresses and people feel more liberated to talk about their experiences, we too may have to deal with a situation that is similar to that in the South.

Therefore, matters relating to the protection of young people and vulnerable adults are important, and I do not doubt that those with jurisdiction over such issues are dealing with them. The time will come when we will have responsibility for such matters, and I doubt that there is a Member in the House who would not take seriously the safety of children and vulnerable adults.

Mr B McCrea: Does the deputy First Minister agree that his Department must pursue all avenues to bring all sex offenders to account? Following the deputy First Minister's answer to my honourable friend Jim Shannon, is he not surprised that many of the perpetrators of some of the worst cases of child abuse on this island have not been prosecuted? Will he explain why there have been no prosecutions in, to use his terminology, the North of Ireland? Has a deal been struck in Northern Ireland similar to that in the South of Ireland?

The deputy First Minister: I do not have any information to suggest that the authorities in the North have struck a deal that is similar to that in the South and that many people are talking about. My view on the issue is very clear, and others have expressed it recently: those who are responsible for the abuse of children or vulnerable adults should be prosecuted and brought before the courts, no matter how far back cases go. If those people are found guilty, they should be sent to prison for a very long time.

All of us are now absorbing the detail of some of the stories that we are hearing. We have heard first-hand accounts from many people. I watched 'Questions and Answers' and saw Michael O'Brien, a former Fianna Fáil mayor, speak movingly about his experiences. The short answer, therefore, is that yes, people should be pursued, prosecuted and, if found guilty, face the penalty.

With regard to doing deals, from our experience, we cannot say that we will have to deal with the fallout from all that. The debate has been contained to what has happened in the South over the past five or six decades. However, I know women in the area from which I come who were in some of those schools, who were abused and who have made claims. Some have had their claims settled and others have not. However,

some of the stories that one hears are absolutely appalling. Those people now live in the North.

We all have to be conscious that we could be dealing with further revelations about different situations. There was, for example, a debate in the 'Derry Journal' about a number of children who were sent to Australia and how their lives were fundamentally changed after being moved several thousand miles from their families.

There is, therefore, a lot of pain around this issue, and it is the responsibility of us all to approach it sensitively. However, we, too, may have our responsibilities to face with regard to that matter.

Legislation

2. **Mr Burns** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail how many pieces of draft legislation from its Department are currently awaiting Executive approval. (AQO 2832/09)

The deputy First Minister: No legislative proposals are awaiting Executive approval at present. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is, however, developing proposals for a commissioner for older people and a new victims and survivors' service. Legislation will be required to establish both, but we intend, as the first stage, to issue policy proposals for consultation later this year. After consultation, we will seek the agreement of the Executive to introduce the relevant Bills in the Assembly. Other legislative requirements may arise, and the Executive's agreement to the policy and the legislation will be sought in accordance with established procedures.

Mr Burns: What is the timetable for bringing forward new equality legislation as requested by the Equality Commission?

The deputy First Minister: As the Member well knows, we will continue to legislate to provide legal protection against discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity. Thus far, no policy decisions have been made about a single equality Bill.

Mrs Long: How does the deputy First Minister, as leader of the Executive, rate their performance given that three Ministers have complained about issues that they want addressed being held up in the Executive? Sammy Wilson, Caitríona Ruane and Michael McGimpsey have raised that issue in the Chamber in the past couple of weeks.

The deputy First Minister: People will know that, on an ongoing basis, there are matters to be agreed, processes to go through and agreements to be forged before we can move to deal with those matters. From our perspective, quite clearly, we need to see a situation develop whereby the issues that people want to bring to the Assembly will be dealt with. However,

that can happen only in the context of us being in a position to do that by reaching the agreements that are required to ensure that those processes are expedited.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle agus a Aire. Will the Minister, as joint Chairperson of the Executive, outline the legislative record of the Executive?

The deputy First Minister: Since restoration, 27 Executive Bills have been introduced to the Assembly. Members will know that the First Minister and I were responsible for three of those: namely, the Public Authorities (Reform) Bill, the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill and the Financial Assistance Bill.

A substantial body of work has been undertaken over the past couple of years.

2.45 pm

Economic Advice Unit

3. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update of the work of the economic advice unit. (AQO 2833/09)

The deputy First Minister: As set out in the ministerial code, OFMDFM has responsibility for cross-cutting economic policy matters. The economic policy and regeneration directorate provides lead support in that area. From within that directorate's economic policy unit, the economic advice unit provides professional economic advice to Ministers and officials in the Department. It has a key role in supporting Ministers on issues arising from the economic downturn.

In the latter half of 2008, the unit arranged and co-ordinated ministerial meetings with key stakeholder groups to assess the local impact of the economic downturn and to identify options for remedial action. That work allowed the Executive to consolidate the package of credit-crunch measures that were announced on 15 December 2008. The economic downturn is a standing item of Executive business. For each Executive meeting, the economic advice unit provides a paper on the implementation of the December package, a report on key developments and an assessment of the ongoing impact of the downturn.

The unit provides economic briefing and advice to Ministers on correspondence and invitation cases, and administrative support to the cross-sector advisory forum. The unit also works closely with other departmental officials to quality assure business cases for adherence to DFP green book and other best-practice standards.

Mr P J Bradley: Given that OFMDFM, the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment have so far failed to

tackle the economic crisis in a unified manner, does the deputy First Minister recognise the advantage of merging the three Departments' economic units?

The deputy First Minister: The Member needs to be conscious of the steps that the Executive have taken. We have consulted widely and had meetings with banks, the Institute of Directors, the construction sector, the energy regulator, energy companies, trade unions, the business sector, and the community and voluntary sector. Indeed, the Ministers who were identified in the Member's question participated in some of the meetings.

We have taken action to support local business and local people. We have frozen domestic rates at a cost of £40 million, which makes the average local household £1,000 better off. We have waived domestic water charges for 2009-2010, which puts an average of £160 back into people's pockets. We are reducing the cost of prescriptions. We have implemented the fuel credit scheme for the most disadvantaged households. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has increased support for the debt advisory services that are provided for local people.

We have a fast-track support service for business. We have provided improved support services for the unemployed through jobs and benefits offices. We have used capital spending of our investment strategy to support construction. We used December monitoring to bring forward spending on roads, schools and farms to support the construction sector.

We have continued to meet banks, local people and businesses, and we have planned further meetings involving banking interests beyond the four local clearing banks. We intend to meet building societies to discuss mortgage lending, and we have established the cross-sector advisory forum to enhance our ability to stay in touch with local interests across the community. The economic downturn is a standing item of Executive business, and we will maintain our close attention to the matter.

Mr K Robinson: Will the First Minister explain the difference between the work of the economic advice unit and that of the economic policy unit within OFMDFM? Will he illustrate that difference through reference to the work that is being undertaken by the units?

The deputy First Minister: The Member will know that the units provide different functions in the Department's pursuance of its economic strategy. Against the backdrop of the economic downturn, it is vital that people with a range of experience and specialities are available to us. We are conscious of the need to maintain the workings of the units.

If, through time, we decide that a different system may represent an improvement, we will consider that

option. However, we believe that the different units' responsibilities provide important advice for Ministers.

The Department's economic policy and regeneration directorate is headed by a grade 3. The directorate has two divisions: the regeneration division, which deals with the investment strategy, the Strategic Investment Board and the former military sites at Maze/Long Kesh; and the economic policy unit. The economic policy unit has five branches: the policy innovation unit; the sustainable development unit; the financial issues unit; the Programme for Government unit; and the economic advice unit. The economic advice unit provides professional economic advice to Ministers and officials in OFMDFM, and it is staffed by three professionally qualified economists who have been outposted from DFP.

Commission for Older People

4. **Mr Brady** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the progress with legislation to create an older person's commissioner. (AQO 2834/09)

The deputy First Minister: We intend to introduce legislation that will enable us to appoint a commissioner for older people. Officials in OFMDFM are developing detailed policy proposals together with a draft Bill, which we intend to issue for public consultation in the autumn of 2009. In developing those proposals, officials are considering the evidence base. They engage with relevant stakeholders, including age-sector representatives, the interim older people's advocate, Dame Joan Harbison, and others, to ensure that there is the broadest possible involvement in the preparatory stages of the policy development and legislative processes prior to further public consultation. As part of the process, in February 2009, junior Minister Donaldson met Ruth Marks, who is the Older People's Commissioner for Wales.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. Has OFMDFM examined the powers that an older person's commissioner will have, as outlined in the Age Concern and Help the Aged report?

The deputy First Minister: In May 2008, Help the Aged and Age Concern published a report on the possible remit and powers of an independent commissioner for older people. The report examined various models, including the Commissioner for Children and Young People, the ombudsman's inspectorate model and the advocacy model and concluded that the enhanced commissioner model reflects a wider approach to the protection of the rights and interests of older people. The enhanced commissioner model is an extension of the powers and duties of the Commissioner for

Children and Young People's model, and there are various powers envisaged in that.

The age sector submitted a further report in March 2009 building on the previous report, and it suggests some additional powers, most notably those of mediation and arbitration. We have not yet made any decisions on the range and scope of the proposed powers and duties, and we will await the outcome of the public consultation before coming to any final decisions.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Will the deputy First Minister confirm that it was announced on 18 December 2007 that an older people's commissioner was to be appointed in 2008? An interim appointment of an older people's advocate was announced on 4 April 2008 and was made on 4 November 2008. On 12 January 2009, the First Minister told us that it needed primary legislation. Will the Minister tell us what on earth has been going on in the interim period and how long does primary legislation take?

The deputy First Minister: To be fair to the First Minister, he also made it clear that it was a complex piece of work, that many discussions were taking place on the matter, and that, because of the need to get it right, there would be no speedy legislation in that regard. We are trying to get it right, and we are doing that in consultation with the various interests who advocate for older people.

Mrs M Bradley: What budget has been recommended for the older people's commissioner?

The deputy First Minister: We will write to the Member with that information; I do not have the figure to hand.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 5 and 6 have been withdrawn.

Public Services

7. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the pressures on public spending, if it recognises the need to develop more effective and efficient services on an all-island basis. (AQO 2837/09)

12. **Ms J McCann** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what assessment it has made of the saving and efficiencies to be made by developing greater co-ordination and service delivery across the island of Ireland. (AQO 2842/09)

The deputy First Minister: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 7 and 12 together.

The First Minister and I are aware of the need for greater efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of public services. On 9 April, we announced our intention

to bring to the Assembly proposals for the creation of an efficiency review panel for approval. That was a consequence of the provision in the St Andrews Agreement that envisaged the appointment of an efficiency review panel.

The Programme for Government also contains a commitment to review the number of Departments by 2011. The first task of the efficiency review panel will be to examine the number and organisation of Departments in light of the present financial pressures and the implications of the review of public administration, and to ensure the best departmental structure for the efficient delivery of public services.

The review panel will report later this year. The review will be based on fairness and efficiency, and it will take account of the requirement to protect the safeguards that ensure that the Executive are representative of the community and can work together successfully in the operation of the institutions.

In addition, a review group consisting of senior officials and an advisory panel of four experts, two appointed by the Executive and two appointed by the Irish Government, has been established under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council, as provided for in the St Andrews Agreement. The advisory panel has completed its report on the efficiency and value for money of the existing North/South implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland, and it has submitted it to the review group. After considering the panel's recommendations in consultation with the relevant sponsoring Departments and Ministers, the review group will submit the report to the next plenary meeting of the NSMC.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for his response. He spoke about the efficiency review panel. Given the substantial savings to be made, particularly by reducing the duplication of administration, North and South, will the deputy First Minister and his office also consider the potential savings from the work of the efficiency review panel? Go raibh maith agat.

The deputy First Minister: I am on record as having stated that there is unnecessary duplication across the North and South. Such duplication leads to confused services and additional cost. The people who pay for, and avail themselves of, the services bear the brunt of that cost. Through greater co-operation, we can deliver better, more co-ordinated services across the island at a reduced cost. Such co-operation should not be restricted to the border region but should happen across the island.

The Assembly is in general agreement that, in cases of mutual benefit to institutions, North and South, it should consistently challenge itself to determine how to make best use of the limited resources available

because of the economic downturn. I have heard many people question the existence of two arts councils, two sports councils and three tourist boards. No one should oppose better services or a reduction in public expenditure. Although OFMDFM has not finalised the terms of reference for the efficiency review panel, the review should address how to make such savings.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The deputy First Minister outlined how greater partnership between North and South can achieve savings and the better targeting and delivery of services. Will he update Members on the innovative work being developed for the north-west gateway?

The deputy First Minister: The north-west gateway initiative is a good example of cross-border co-operation. Since the initiative was formally announced in May 2006, officials have sought to find ways in which the Executive and the Irish Government, working in co-operation, can attract new employers and economic benefits to rejuvenate the region. Although the initiative has no associated funding, it aims to derive greater synergy in the north-west through the effective co-ordination of existing public expenditure.

Progress has been made on several key projects, including those that improve the area's infrastructure. Investment has been made in roads, railways, the City of Derry Airport and Project Kelvin, the connectivity initiative in the north-west that will provide a direct link to international cable networks in North America.

There is cross-border co-operation on health in the form of a pilot project that provides an out-of-hours GP service to patients from Inishowen and the delivery of a radiotherapy service to patients from Donegal and Belfast.

3.00 pm

ENVIRONMENT

Planning Service

1. **Mr McFarland** asked the Minister of the Environment what changes are being made to the Planning Service's management review board.

(AQO 2851/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): During March and April of this year, my Department ran a competition to appoint an independent board member to the Planning Service's management board. The successful candidate is expected to take up the post in early summer. The independent board member will not take executive decisions, including those on planning applications, but he will be expected to

provide external advice and expertise that will inform the board's decision-making process.

Mr McFarland: I thank the Minister for his answer. In a recent response to a question for written answer, figures from his Department for 2007-08 showed that 82% of cases referred to the management review board were not even considered. Of those that were considered, none was successful. Will the Minister provide figures for 2008-09? With planning to be devolved to councils in 2011, does he agree that it is strange that the management board completely ignores councils' views on planning?

The Minister of the Environment: I do not have the figures for 2008-09 to hand, but I will supply them to the Member.

There are two ways of looking at the issue of referrals to the management board. First, we could consider the situation that pertained before we introduced the new criteria. At that time, some councils referred to the management board almost any decision with which they disagreed. Of course, that caused all kinds of problems: the process was slowed down; more referrals were made; and cases were with the management board for longer. The situation was not very satisfactory. Consequently, after consultation, referrals to the management board became subject to certain criteria.

Applications that were referred to it must meet one or more of three criteria: no lack of specific detail in a newly formed policy; no proposals that departed from the regional development strategy, a development plan or a draft development plan; and no strong neighbourhood objections to a planning application.

I must say to the Member that the management board subsequently overturned almost 40% of the applications that it had accepted for consideration. The management board's opposition to and support for applications that it considered was split about half and half. I accept that the number is very small; however, when applications meet the criteria, it would be wrong to conclude that the management board ignores councils' views. The evidence is that, in 40% of cases, the management board has accepted those views and changed the decision.

Mr Gallagher: Will the Minister explain why Planning Service is asking for more money to deal with planning applications? Does he support that request?

The Minister of the Environment: I am happy to answer the question. I am glad that the Member asked it and that it was accepted, despite its being fairly wide of the mark of the original question.

It is important to consider the whole issue of what type of Planning Service we want. There had been no increase in planning fees for four years. Even during the boom years in the development industry, the Planning Service did not ask developers for additional

money. As a result, the cost of planning fees had fallen substantially in real terms. It is proposed to increase planning fees by 20%. Most of that rise is to meet inflation over the four years in which fees did not go up. I emphasise that the decision was taken only after I had ensured that efficiencies were squeezed from Planning Service and that additional money had been sought from the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

We then had to decide whether we wished to have fewer planners in the system, which would have resulted in slower responses, longer waiting times and a loss of expertise, or to keep the expertise that we had. Developers tell me all the time that they would rather have quick decisions than applications lying in the system for a long time. There cannot be quick decisions if there are not bodies to process those decisions.

I am pleased to say that the processing times for planning applications have come down substantially. We are meeting the target that was set in the Programme for Government. The choice is very simple: after looking for efficiencies in the planning system, do we finish up with a situation in which there are fewer officers and, as a result, slower processing? It is easy for the Member to complain about planning fees increasing. However, when one considers the background to the issue and the alternative — applications taking longer to process — it is quite clear why we made the decision that we did.

Ms Lo: There is a perception that the definition of “significant application” is too rigid because it excludes local significant applications. What is the Minister’s view?

The Minister of the Environment: A “significant application” can be defined in a number of ways. They include applications that have significant economic importance to an area or a particular industry. They may be significant in relation to the impact that they have on localities or in relation to how they impact on policies and perhaps deviate from existing policies.

I look at a range of applications that are regarded as significant, from factories to shopping centres and so on. It is right to have a definition that is not too rigid because that enables us to look at a wide range of applications when we decide whether to send them to SPG or deal with them at a divisional office.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

National Parks

3. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of the Environment if his Department has identified any areas which could be potential National Parks. (AQO 2853/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have yet to discuss with Executive colleagues whether to establish national parks in Northern Ireland. If it is decided to

proceed, the first step will be new enabling legislation to set out the framework for national parks. To draw up the legislation, there would need to be full public consultation on proposed arrangements for national parks, including the aims, structures and powers. After the new enabling legislation was in place, the second stage of the process would be to identify candidate sites for designation. I have no plans for any specific area at this stage.

Mr Easton: Does the Minister agree that national parks could lead to great tourism potential right across Northern Ireland? The Mourne Mountains and, perhaps, the Antrim coast could be designated. In my constituency of North Down, the Dufferin estate, through which the Ulster Way runs, has herds of wild deer and huge woodland areas. Does the Minister agree that those areas have enormous potential?

The Minister of the Environment: Certainly. There are a number of reasons for designating national parks. One is to conserve important environmental assets. Another is to enable us, by conserving and enhancing those particular assets, to exploit them economically. The Tourist Board is very supportive of the idea of national parks because it believes that using the national park brand would be one way of drawing people into areas of natural beauty in Northern Ireland. Those areas could be used as a base, which would be of benefit to the Northern Ireland economy. My visit to the Cairngorms National Park showed me that the national park brand benefits farmers, businesses, hotels, bed and breakfasts, and so on. Consequently, tourism in that area has been strongly enhanced.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am feeling very lonely, so I remind the Minister that all remarks should be directed through the Chair.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. How would rural communities be sustained and allowed to thrive in such parks? We must ensure that people born and raised there are able to continue living there.

The Minister of the Environment: First, 60% of the membership of the Cairngorms National Parks Authority, which I visited, is drawn from the local area. Five members are directly elected, and 10 are local councillors, so they have a strong interest in sustaining the area. That is the type of model that I would like to see in Northern Ireland.

Secondly, although the authority there has planning powers, I do not envisage a national park authority in Northern Ireland having such powers, because, in 2011, I hope that planning powers will be given to councils. The Cairngorms National Park Authority has used its planning powers to ensure a supply of housing. I looked at some developments there, including a brand new village comprising 1,500 houses that is to

be built on a heathland area. The rationale of that proposal is to ensure that people who work in the national park have a home there. In turn, that will help to sustain many local businesses.

The whole idea of making those areas economically attractive by preserving their assets is to do exactly as the Member said, namely to draw in tourists to generate economic activity, so that communities can be sustained and families are able to stay, work and live where they want.

Mr P J Bradley: The Mourne and Slieve Croob in south Down is one area that might be designated as a national park, or, to use a phrase that I have never heard before, it might be a “candidate site”. What consideration has the Minister given to the views that have already been expressed by residents of that area?

The Minister of the Environment: I am not sure whether that question was prompted by the presence of some of those residents, some of whom I met about five minutes before coming into the Chamber. I have made it clear that I want to hear people’s views on this issue. I had a productive meeting with residents from the area who expressed their reservations. However, Members should bear in mind that a long process must be gone through before we reach the point of designating areas as national parks. I have not said that the Mourne area will be a national park. As I said in an earlier answer, there is first a need for policy development, then enabling legislation, and then legislation that designates specific areas in Northern Ireland. As that legislation goes through the Assembly, whether at Committee or House level, there will be plenty of time for consultation, during which people will be able to make their views known.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Maskey is not in his place to ask question 4, and question 5 has been withdrawn.

Road Safety: Finance

6. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of the Environment what impact the change to direct financing has had on road safety committees. (AQO 2856/09)

12. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of the Environment if he has met with representatives of the Road Safety Council since announcing the decision to remove core funding. (AQO 2862/09)

The Minister of the Environment: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 6 and 12 together. In December 2008, following a highly critical independent review of the Road Safety Council’s performance, I wrote to it to confirm that, from 1 April 2009, funding would be directed away from central administration into the front line road safety activities of local communities.

I also met representatives of the Road Safety Council on 27 February. At that meeting, the Road Safety Council pressed me to reverse my decision to withdraw the core funding, and I made it clear that my decision would stand.

3.15 pm

It is too early to say what impact the change to direct funding has had on local road safety committees, apart from the fact that they report directly to the Department instead of to the Road Safety Council. However, I have made it clear that the action is not directed towards the local committees; indeed, they should benefit from it. In the face of critical reports, I had to make a decision about whether we wanted to keep pumping tens of thousands of pounds into a body that was administering as much money as it was costing to run.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is there a danger that road safety committees — I declare an interest, as I am a member of one — which are largely made up of enthusiastic volunteers, will simply be mowed down by the juggernaut that is central government bureaucracy when what they actually need is an arm’s length funding body to deal with their queries?

The Minister of the Environment: I could take that criticism if there was any indication that that was the case. Let us be clear that £160,000 was available every year in the Department for road safety. That money was channelled through the Road Safety Council. In the last four years, that money was never fully drawn down. In some years, a quarter of it was never used. The requests for that funding came and were to come through the Road Safety Council. If the local committees depended on the Road Safety Council to ensure that funding was available to them, it did not do a very good job, even though about half of the money was spent on administrative costs.

One of the points that I made very clear to officials before I made the decision was that I did not want to see one expensive bureaucracy replaced with another or gobbledegook forms that people could not understand. The form that is sent to the committees has two pages, one of which has four columns of questions about what the applicants want to do, how many people will attend, what objectives they hope to achieve, and how it fits in with the strategy. In case even that is too much for the groups, there are pointers as to what might be put in each of the columns. Therefore, to describe it as being run over by the juggernaut of central government bureaucracy is to put it a bit strongly. We have sought to make the system as good as it can be.

It disappoints me that, despite the money being available, some of the committees were encouraged not to apply for it. Thankfully, 10 committees have now applied, and I have extended the normal application

period so that those that have not applied still have the opportunity to do so.

Mr P Ramsey: There is anger and frustration in the voluntary and community sector, which is at the coalface in dealing with and advocating on road safety measures, such as cycling proficiency programmes in schools. The Minister was cherry-picking his criticism. One independent review stated very clearly that the Road Safety Council's secretariat was pivotal to the organisation and the capacity-building of the volunteers.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Ramsey, please ask a question.

Mr P Ramsey: In the light of concern that eight of the committees to which the Minister referred are facing closure as a result of the decision that he made, will he reconsider that decision?

The Minister of the Environment: I have made the position clear on a number of occasions. It is significant that the issue has come to me from the Committee for the Environment and through letters and representations from individual committees.

Reports were produced in 1987, 2002 and 2008 that were damning of some aspects of the Road Safety Council. It is significant that the only positive view of the Road Safety Council in the most recent report was that it had good political connections. The accuracy of that has been borne out by the fact that I am inundated with letters from all parties about the Road Safety Council.

In the most recent report, 36 points were made, of which only one was supportive of the Road Safety Council. I could not have ignored that, and I do not understand what Pat Ramsey is saying about the voluntary sector being up in arms. The local road safety committees will have access to funding, which previously was shared between them and the Road Safety Council and half of which went towards administration costs.

The local road safety committees will have direct access to funding through completion of the simple form that I described to the Member for East Belfast Naomi Long. I hope that, rather than walk away from the good work that many of the committees have done in local areas, they will take the opportunity to apply for funding and strengthen the work that has been done. In fact, they could receive substantially more than they received previously, but that will depend on the programmes that they put forward. It is important that the committees apply for funds and do not refuse to play simply because the Road Safety Council is no longer there to hold their hands — albeit hand-holding that was seemingly not done effectively.

Mr McQuillan: Who will do the work of the Road Safety Council now, and how much will that cost?

The Minister of the Environment: The Road Safety Council was a conduit through which a lot of the Department of the Environment's money went to the road safety committees at local level. It was also supposed to be a strategic body that helped to develop road safety activities at local level. All of the reports stated that it was not fulfilling that function. That was not a one-off observation that came out of the blue; it was built on the 1997 and 2002 reports, which showed no change, and the most recent report in 2008. I could not ignore that.

The work of the road safety committees is done at local level. They will continue to receive financial support and any other support that they need from my Department, and that financial support will be easily accessed.

High Hedges

7. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of his Department's policy on high/nuisance hedges. (AQO 2857/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Any scheme that is provided for in new legislation to deal with nuisance or high hedge problems in Northern Ireland will be operated by local government. I would not underestimate the amount of additional work that such a scheme would mean for district councils, particularly during the early stage of the scheme's operation, when existing problems affecting many householders will need to be dealt with. With that in mind, together with the competing priorities and resource constraints that I am facing, I have decided not to progress the development of policy and legislation on the matter until after the 11 new councils have been elected in May 2011. That allows me to focus departmental staff resources on higher-priority environmental issues over the coming years.

Mr Lunn: I hear what the Minister says, but the new councils will not come into being for another two years. During direct rule, legislation was enforced in the UK that was intended to apply here. Does the Minister share my disappointment that he is not able to do anything about that issue, despite the fact that he has two years in which to do something? Nuisance hedges represent a minor problem that causes maximum irritation, as the Minister will know.

The Minister of the Environment: I recognise that there is disappointment among Members. I probably receive as many letters about high hedges as I do about the Road Safety Council.

Members will be aware of the issues concerning Assembly legislation. First, the fact that legislation exists in England does not mean that it can be easily transposed to Northern Ireland. Secondly, councils and those who serve on them know the amount of work

that councils have to undertake in preparation for amalgamation and the establishment of new councils and transition committees, and they know that it is imposing a substantial burden on them. Thirdly, if legislation were to be introduced, it would probably place a heavy burden on councils because they would have to deal with a backlog of complaints about high hedges. Fourthly, account must be taken of the amount of legislation that has already piled up in the Assembly — the RPA legislation for councils alone will involve four pieces of legislation, never mind the promised legislation on planning reform, etc. Thus, the Assembly and the Environment Committee are already committed to dealing with a heavy legislative workload from my Department.

Therefore it would be much better to look at legislation to deal with high hedges once councils have amalgamated. Rather than individual councils, which might have different emphases, dealing with the matter separately now and then having to join together after 2011, the new councils could deal with the matter. Even if it were possible to get the legislation through before then, it would still be much better to legislate when the new councils are established.

Mr O'Loan: I imagine that, after the new councils are formed in 2011, the next thing that we will hear will be that they have so many new tasks to get on with that the legislation had better be postponed for another couple of years. I am inundated with queries on nuisance hedges, as, I am sure, is every Member. People are very annoyed that hedges are growing into their gardens and restricting light, and they cannot understand why the Assembly is not dealing with the matter. Does the Minister not accept that that is a testimony to the failure of his Department and his lack of political will to address a very important issue?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member always knows where the populist button is and how to press it, even when he should know and probably does know that, if what he says were to be examined in the cold light of day, it would be very embarrassing. The Member knows that, even if we were to start the legislative process today, councils could do nothing until the 26 councils were amalgamated to form 11 new ones.

The Member also knows the legislative demands on the Assembly. I have outlined some of the legislative demands that my Department is making on the Assembly, and, given those of all the other Departments, it would not be possible to pass the legislation in the time required. I am already hearing complaints from councils about how they are expected to do all that they have to do to be ready for 2011 — getting departments joined together, councils co-ordinated, new officers appointed and so on. Imposing a new legislative requirement on them would be very demanding; the Member said as much

himself. The SDLP is using this issue to score cheap points rather than to deliver a considered policy.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Barnett Formula

1. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the Barnett consequential arisings from the UK Budget announcement on 22 April 2009. (AQO 2871/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): The Chancellor of the Exchequer delivered the 2009 Budget statement to Parliament on 22 April. That included further measures to support the economy as well as details of the fiscal consolidation required from 2010-11.

In relation to the Barnett consequentials, the Northern Ireland Executive received £116.4 million in additional funding over the years 2009-2010 and 2010-11 as a result of the announcements made in the Budget. That is composed of £26.5 million of current expenditure for 2009-2010 and £60.7 million for 2010-11, as well as £23.8 million in capital investment in 2009-2010 and £5.4 million for 2010-11.

3.30 pm

The 2008 pre-Budget report issued last November indicated that £5 billion of additional efficiency savings would be required of UK Departments in 2010-11, and the 2009 Budget confirmed that the Executive's departmental expenditure limit would be reduced by £122.8 million as a result. The 2009 Budget also provided some early indications on overall growth in UK public expenditure over the medium term; that is, to 2013-14. The latest Treasury projections imply that there will be a marked slowdown in the growth of current expenditure and that capital investment will decline. However, we will only know the precise level of Barnett consequentials for the years 2011-12 to 2013-14 as part of the next UK-wide spending review, which is expected sometime next year.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. As the Minister explained, the consequentials arose from increased spending on economic activities at a UK-wide level. Therefore, will the Minister assure the House that the Executive will invest the consequentials in our own measures to improve our economic situation and avoid the temptation of using the £116 million to offset the increased efficiency savings?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I hear the honourable Member's point and, of course, that will be a matter for the Executive to consider as part of the

next monitoring round and subsequent monitoring rounds. However, if the Member is saying that we need to invest the £116 million as extra expenditure in programmes, that would mean, in effect, having to cut £122 million from somewhere else, because one offsets the other. I see the Member nodding in agreement. Therefore, although it could be decided to allocate the £116 million and make cuts worth £122 million, the most sensible approach would be to use the incoming £166 million to offset the £122 million worth of cuts.

One of the things that came out of the Budget was that, compared with predictions of what would be taken out of the Northern Ireland Budget — between £400 million to £600 million was suggested — the figures for the so-called efficiencies turned out to be much less than that; moreover, we got the Barnett consequentials. Therefore, although it was not a tremendous outcome for Northern Ireland, it was much better than some had predicted; and, when compared with other devolved regions, it was not as bad as could have been feared.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. At this time it is important that the most careful consideration be given to the economy, and knee-jerk reactions rarely help. Will the Minister tell the Assembly what representations he has had directly from Alistair Darling about the consequentials?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There is always contact between the Treasury and the Department of Finance and Personnel, especially in the run-up to, and directly following, a Budget. As the Member will be aware, only last week we approved a scheme announced by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster, for extra help for businesses in Northern Ireland at this difficult time. That shows the importance of helping the economy and putting it at the centre of the Programme for Government.

It is also worth pointing out that, as well as the Barnett consequentials, there were measures in the Budget that apply right across the United Kingdom and, therefore, directly apply in Northern Ireland as well. Those measures include the one-year increase in first-year capital allowances to 48%, an increase in statutory redundancy pay, making the weekly rate £380, as well as issues concerning the winter fuel allowance and the child element of the child tax credit. As a result of the Budget, those elements apply directly to Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom.

Mr O'Loan: The basis of the Barnett consequentials was support for housing and energy efficiency measures. Will the Minister give his personal support to reserving the Barnett consequentials that we have received in Northern Ireland for those purposes?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member knows that when his colleague and party leader

Mark Durkan was Finance Minister, he was always at pains to point out that when Barnett consequentials came to Northern Ireland, or any devolved regions, they did not come earmarked for any particular purpose. That has always been the accepted position, even by the Member's own party. Of course, the corollary of that would be to say that if Barnett consequentials were claimed for health or agriculture they could not be used for any other reason, regardless of the particular needs in Northern Ireland. That should always be a matter for the Executive, and they will decide the overall strategy and priorities for Northern Ireland. As the Member knows, the Department for Social Development has fared considerably better than a lot of Departments in the distribution of in-year monitoring when it comes to capital investment.

Energy Performance Certificates

2. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on energy performance certificates. (AQO 2872/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The final phase of the Energy Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 came into effect on 30 December 2008. Since then, the owner or landlord of a domestic or commercial property that is constructed or is to be sold or rented must have an energy performance certificate available to provide to any prospective buyer or tenant at the earliest possible opportunity. My officials have been engaged in an enforcement programme since the regulations were made in April 2008, which has included a series of information seminars attended by over 1,500 members of the public, property professionals and solicitors. Officials have established a dedicated website, press advertisements have been taken out and editorials have been placed in local newspapers and trade magazines. Officials have also issued mailshots, including to MLAs, and made over 500 visits to estate and letting agents.

Mr Craig: Will the Minister explain why the onus to provide an energy performance certificate lies with the homeowner, rather than with estate agents?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That issue has been raised by other Members. We are bound by the European directive on the energy performance of buildings. Article 7 of that directive states that a certificate is made available:

“by the owner to the prospective buyer or tenant”.

That requirement, which was set down in EU law, had to be reflected in the regulations that were introduced by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) to implement that part of the directive.

Although estate agents have no statutory obligations under the regulations, they have been largely supportive of the energy performance certificate requirements and have assisted the Department by encouraging clients to comply.

Mr Gallagher: Does the Minister agree that energy performance certificates alone will not make a significant contribution to the reduction of our carbon footprint? We need several initiatives. Has his Department any other initiatives that it might be prepared to fund, such as the initiative introduced in the Republic of Ireland to improve the energy efficiency of homes? The Republic of Ireland is in an economic downturn, and that initiative has created 200 jobs. Does the Minister have anything more in mind?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: If the Member waits for my answer to question 4 he will hear the answer to his question. In my answer to that question I will provide an update of the plans for green rates rebates. Therefore, we not only have the matter in mind, we have concrete proposals on it.

Energy performance certificates are beneficial tools. They allow prospective buyers and tenants to access information on whether a building complies with up-to-date building regulations. The certificates are important but they are only part of the jigsaw. When we come to talk about green rates rebates, the Member will see that the Department is taking specific measures to deal with the matters that he has raised.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Alastair Ross is not in his place for question 3.

Rates: Green Rebates

4. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on his plans for green rates rebates. (AQO 2874/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We did not have to wait long for question 4.

Last December, I announced my intention to introduce two new green rate-relief schemes next year. One scheme encourages homeowners to bring their homes up to modern insulation standards by offering them one-off rebates. The other scheme offers an initial five- or two-year rates exemption to the first occupiers of new zero- and low-carbon homes respectively. The decision to introduce the schemes was taken in response to views expressed during a 12-week consultation last year and was supported by the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

For both schemes to be operational by next April, primary and subordinate legislation must be made before then. The primary legislation has been drafted and I am engaged in the process of securing Executive

approval for its introduction to the Assembly. Officials have also commenced work on the necessary subordinate legislation and are liaising with key internal and external stakeholders on the detailed outworking of the scheme.

It is imperative that the draft legislation is approved by the Executive and that the matter comes before the Assembly as soon as possible. There should be no further delay in bringing it to the Assembly.

Mr Hilditch: I am concerned to learn that if progress is not made on the necessary legislation soon, the scheme may not be in place by April 2010 as originally planned. Will the Minister indicate whether delay in the legislation will have a potentially adverse impact on other rating reforms such as relief for small businesses?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: To mitigate the risk of any delay, powers have been taken in the draft primary legislation to allow reliefs under both schemes to be applied retrospectively. However, it would be far better for the legislation to be in place by next April. It is absolutely essential that that happens as quickly as possible. I know that the proposals in the comprehensive rates legislation have been welcomed by all parties, and therefore there should be no further delay in agreeing the matter in the Executive and bringing it to the Assembly. We are taking steps to mitigate the risk of delay.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Will the Minister tell us whether his plans for green rates will benefit only private householders and private landlords?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member is aware of the consultation that took place on that matter and the intense engagement with the Committee for Finance and Personnel. He is also aware of the serious representations that were made by the Energy Saving Trust, the Housing Executive and others as to how the schemes should be implemented. They had a very clear view as to how that should happen.

A decision was taken to allow, in the draft Bill, the social and private-rented sectors to be included in the future on the basis that they already have funding in place to do a lot of what should be done in the private sector now, through the money that is given to the Department for Social Development and the Housing Executive. The Housing Executive took the view that that was the best approach to take. We will keep the matter under review.

3.45 pm

Mr K Robinson: It is difficult to see what the potential fallout from the green rates rebates will be, given that the scheme is a new departure for the Department. However, will the Minister indicate how much revenue he estimates might be lost through green

rates rebates and how he plans to recover any potential losses?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is always important to bear mind the cost of any measures that are introduced. Members in this House in particular have a tendency to talk about what needs to be done; however, they never actually add up how much their proposals will cost. If one were to add up the cost of everything that was sought here over the past couple of weeks, the total would be hundreds of millions of pounds. With one or two notable exceptions, no Member is ever prepared to say where in the block grant the money should come from. Therefore, the Member is right to make his point.

It was agreed that the amount of rebate for insulation measures should be higher than that of the Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) cashback scheme, which is about £150. A figure of around £200 per measure is being considered, however, the overall cost will not be unduly onerous. I will send the Member that information in writing.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his answers. Given the good public and cross-party response to the work on green rates rebates, will he explain why some of the grants for energy improvements have been withdrawn, because that is a travesty?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am not clear exactly what the Member is talking about. Perhaps the issue is a matter for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department for Social Development or the Department of the Environment to address; however, it is not a matter for me to address. I can only suggest that the Member tables a question to the appropriate Department in order to elicit further information.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 5 and 6 have been withdrawn.

Strategic Policy Division

7. **Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the work of the Strategic Policy Division. (AQO 2877/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: DFP's strategic policy division fulfils a wide range of functions. In addition to managing the professional economist cadre across the Northern Ireland Civil Service, the division provides a range of professional services to the Minister. Those include advice on policy issues, such as control of public sector pay, delivery of value for money, affordability in all major projects submitted to DFP and a wide range of policy analysis and support functions.

The division's policy-analysis remit includes the local impact of UK tax and spending decisions, as well as input into the development of the Executive's Budget. The division is now also leading on a range of concerns, such as the conacre legal challenge, the difficulties associated with the Presbyterian Mutual Society and the banking industry problems.

Mrs Hanna: First, what contribution has the strategic policy division made specifically to address the economic crisis? Secondly, is it leading on any joint initiatives with other Departments that have direct economic links?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: DFP's strategic policy division takes the lead on developing an overarching economic strategy for Northern Ireland. That is partly because an overarching economic strategy involves policy areas that impact on many Northern Ireland Departments. For example, responsibility for skills and employment policy rests mainly with the Department for Employment and Learning; responsibility for innovation and enterprise rests with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; and responsibility for developing infrastructure rests with the Department for Regional Development. It is also because DFP has responsibility for monitoring and controlling the use of financial resources. Only with DFP leading on that important cross-cutting area can control be exercised adequately and objectively. I hope that my answer has given a flavour of the cross-cutting nature of the work of the strategic policy division.

Economy

8. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on his Department's response to the economic downturn. (AQO 2878/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The main role of the Department of Finance and Personnel in respect of the Executive's response to the economic downturn is to facilitate and assist other Departments as they provide support to local households and businesses in the economic downturn.

I announced the formation of a construction industry forum procurement task group for Northern Ireland in the Assembly on 15 December 2008, and the Executive's reviews of rating, regional rate freeze and the deferral of water charges have all helped many households. Furthermore, non-domestic rating policy has benefited small businesses and manufacturing companies, and a 10-day prompt-payment initiative was announced in November 2008 to assist suppliers' cash flow. Moreover, significant additional support was provided to local firms and businesses as part of last year's in-year monitoring process.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his answer. Returning to the issue of the Barnett consequentials, although I respect fully the right of the Executive to make their own decisions, surely the fact that we are getting £116 million as a result of increased investment in Britain gives a strong indication that we should do more for the economy in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It seems that I must keep reminding Members of the increase in capital investment and expenditure here last year. Capital investment, which assists the construction industry and which will provide a modern infrastructure for Northern Ireland, was increased by 30% last year compared with the year before. That is a very significant increase by anyone's standards, and the Executive have also introduced specific measures to assist businesses and those in jobs in very difficult times. Those measures include capping manufacturing rates, freezing business rates and introducing a small business rate.

If we deal with the wider issue of expenditure coming into Northern Ireland through the block grant, the £118-odd million as a result of the Barnett consequentials, it must be remembered that a significant increase has been built into departmental spending plans in 2009-2010 compared with 2008-09. For example, the Department of Education has seen its resource allocation increased this year by 5.8% and its capital allocation by 18%. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has increased its resource allocation by 4.5%, and the Department for Regional Development, which deals with much of the infrastructural investment, increased its resource allocation by 7.5%. Therefore, significant increases in the spending of various Departments in Northern Ireland have been created through the Budget process, regardless of any money that is gained through the Barnett consequentials.

Mr McCarthy: Until we have those increases —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Ian McCrea is not in his place to ask question 9.

Post Offices

10. **Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, apart from the announced rate relief under the small business rates relief scheme, to outline what other plans he has to help the 540 small Post Offices. (AQO 2880/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The honourable Member's question refers to the rate relief that is available under the small business rates relief scheme. He will be aware that as far as I, as Finance Minister, am concerned, there are limitations in the provision of direct assistance to businesses. The only significant way that I can provide financial assistance is through the rating system, and I will be providing

enhanced relief for our smaller post offices through the forthcoming small business rates relief scheme. Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, I am engaged in securing Executive approval for the introduction of the draft enabling legislation for that scheme in the Assembly, and that must be introduced without further delay.

The post office element of that scheme was worked out following detailed discussions between officials from my Department and local and national representatives of the National Federation of SubPostmasters. Indeed, evidence that that organisation provided influenced final policy.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: In other parts of the United Kingdom, county councils are mindful of the important community functions of local post offices and have turned them into information and access points for public-service delivery. Would the Minister consider such a scheme for Northern Ireland to secure the future of our remaining post offices, particularly those in rural areas?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will certainly take on board the Member's point. However, our plans mean that many small post offices will not have to pay any rates at all.

That will result in an average saving of £1,620 a year. Others will have to pay only 50% of their rates liability, which will result in an average saving of £2,580 a year. The Member will also be aware that, in recognition of the economic downturn to which Members referred today, I announced a freeze on the non-domestic regional rate. That will help all post offices and all other businesses at this time of recession.

We all know the value of post offices, and we all support the post office network. If other measures can be taken for post offices, other Departments need to be pressed and challenged about what they can do. My Department is limited in what it can do, but, through the measures on rates, it is making a considerable contribution to helping post offices. I am sure that the Member will wish to pursue some areas with other Departments.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Barry McElduff is not in his place for question 11; Mr Jimmy Spratt is not in his place for question 12; and Mr Patsy McGlone is not in his place for question 13.

Northern Ireland Block Grant

14. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, following the Chancellor's Budget announcement of £14 billion in efficiency savings, when he will bring proposals before the Executive to address the cuts to the block grant from 2011-12. (AQO 2884/09)

I am really surprised to have been called. I hope that the Minister has an answer to question 14.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I do not know who is more surprised by the fact that we got as far as question 14. I am glad to say that I have an answer.

The most recent UK comprehensive spending review of 2007 determined the funding that was available to the Northern Ireland Executive from the Treasury for 2008-09 to 2010-11. No block grant allocation is in place for 2011-12 and beyond, because the next UK-wide spending review has not happened yet. That is expected to happen at some point next year. Therefore, it is impossible to speculate with any degree of certainty about overall levels of funding from the Treasury.

Mr K Robinson: I am desperately surprised and disappointed that the Minister will not speculate at some length. The cuts that may be imposed on our Budget as a result of efficiency savings would result in difficulties. Will the Minister, in discussions with his colleagues, take into account the dire straits in my constituency of East Antrim, where public-sector jobs have already been decimated to a leave a very low base? When efficiency cuts are mooted, they tend to result in job losses in the public sector in particular.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I take on board the Member's comments about his constituency, and I understand where he is coming from on that issue. I gently suggest to the Member that, given the likely composition of the next Government, he and his party colleagues will have considerably greater influence over the level of the potential efficiency savings beyond the current Budget cycle, which ends in the next financial year, than anyone in the Executive outside of the Ulster Unionist Party. I have no doubt that we can all look forward to no cuts at all. The Member will be able to say that his party delivered no cuts and that there will be no problems for East Antrim.

Mr Deputy Speaker: None of the Members who have their names down to ask questions 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 or 20 are in their places, so that concludes Question Time.

Adjourned at 3.59 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 2 June 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Social Security (Incapacity Benefit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009

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

That the Social Security (Incapacity Benefit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

The regulations provide for financial assistance scheme payments to be taken into account for incapacity benefit purposes in the same way that pension protection fund payments and other pension payments are taken into account. The financial assistance scheme, which was set up under the Pensions Act 2004, operates Great Britain/Northern Ireland-wide and is the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions' responsibility. The scheme provides payments to people who have lost some of, or all, their occupational pension because their defined-benefit pension scheme was underfunded and began to wind up before the pension protection fund was introduced in April 2005.

After the pension protection fund and the financial assistance scheme were established, a consequential provisions Order was introduced to provide for the interaction of pension protection fund payments and financial assistance scheme payments with the benefits system. In general, it provided for them to be taken into account for benefit purposes in the same way as other pension payments are. In particular, the Order provided for payments made under the pension protection fund to be taken into account for the purposes of incapacity benefit. However, the Order cannot make similar provision for payments made under the financial assistance scheme, because they are payable only to people who are aged 65 years and over, by which time entitlement to incapacity benefit has ceased.

Since then, the scope of the financial assistance scheme has been greatly expanded. The scheme now makes payments at 90% of a qualifying member's expected pension, subject to a cap, and pays people from their normal retirement age, subject to a lower age limit of 60.

Furthermore, the scheme has been extended to allow early payment on grounds of ill health. That means that payments under the financial assistance scheme will now be made to people below state pension age who may be entitled to incapacity benefit. Therefore, it is necessary to bring the treatment of payments under the financial assistance scheme into line with payments under the pension protection fund and payments under a pension scheme.

The regulations amend the Social Security (Incapacity Benefit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1994 so that, as is the case for employment and support allowance, financial assistance scheme payments are treated as pension payments for the purposes of incapacity benefit. That means that, in line with other pension payments — for example, an occupational pension or a pension protection fund payment — half of any financial assistance scheme payment in excess of £85 a week is taken into account when calculating entitlement to incapacity benefit. However, that will not affect qualifying members who first became entitled to a payment under the financial assistance scheme before the regulations came into operation. The regulations ensure that claimants are treated equally, irrespective of whether they receive a payment from the financial assistance scheme, the pension protection fund or their pension scheme.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): The Committee for Social Development considered the Social Security (Incapacity Benefit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 at its meetings on 5 March and 2 April.

We understand that the rule is designed to ensure that payments under the financial assistance scheme to people who have lost their occupational pension will be taken into account for incapacity benefit purposes. Committee members asked for clarification on the threshold of financial assistance scheme payments above which incapacity benefit will be reduced, and we noted the departmental response that the financial assistance scheme threshold is £85 a week.

In conclusion, the Committee recommends that the Assembly affirm the Social Security (Incapacity Benefit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As Mr Hilditch said, the Committee has examined the regulations, which will rationalise, tidy up and clarify the perspective of a scheme that had a disjointed impact on claimants. They will bring the regulations into line

with occupational pensions or the financial assistance scheme. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Lo: I support the motion to amend the regulations.

The Minister for Social Development: That was a very short debate. I thank Mr Hilditch, Mr Brady, Ms Lo and other Committee members for their positive attitude to the regulations.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Social Security (Incapacity Benefit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Motions to Amend Standing Orders on Assembly Questions

Mr Speaker: The next three motions are to amend Standing Orders. I propose to conduct the debate as follows: there shall be one debate on all three motions. When all Members who wish to speak have done so, I will put the Question on the first motion. Thereafter, I will ask the Chairperson to move formally each remaining motion in turn, and I will put the Question on each motion without further debate. If that is clear, we shall proceed. The first motion that will be moved is motion (c) in the Order Paper.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Morrow): I beg to move

(c) Leave out Standing Orders 19 and 20 and insert –

“19. QUESTIONS

(1) A member may ask questions of —

(a) a Minister, on matters relating to the Minister’s official responsibilities;

(b) a member representing the Assembly Commission, on matters relating to the Commission’s official responsibilities.

(2) A question should not contain —

(a) statements of facts or names of persons, unless they are necessary to make the question intelligible and can be authenticated;

(b) arguments, inferences or imputations;

(c) adjectives, unless they are necessary to make the question intelligible;

(d) ironical expressions;

(e) hypothetical matter; or

(f) requests for expressions of opinion, legal or otherwise.

(3) A question may be —

(a) for oral answer (see Standing Order 20);

(b) for urgent oral answer (see Standing Order 20A); or

(c) for written answer (see Standing Order 20B).

(4) A question must —

(a) be in writing;

(b) indicate the type of answer sought, within the meaning of paragraph (3);

(c) be submitted to the Business Office by the member, or by the person authorised in writing by the member;

(d) be submitted by hand, by post, by email or by fax.

(5) A question must be answered as clearly and as fully as possible.

20. QUESTIONS FOR ORAL ANSWER

(1) Questions for oral answer for Ministers shall be taken between —

(a) 2.30 pm and 3.30 pm on those Mondays; and

(b) 3.00 pm and 3.30 pm on those Tuesdays;

on which the Assembly is sitting. Where questions for members representing the Assembly Commission are to be taken, they shall be taken after questions for Ministers.

(2) If for any reason the Assembly does not sit on a day when questions for oral answer would normally be taken, the Speaker may allocate additional time for questions on the nearest day when the Assembly does sit.

(3) The Speaker shall from time to time consult the Business Committee on the need to provide additional time for questions.

(4) A rota, agreed by the Business Committee, shall determine who should answer questions on a particular day.

(5) A member who wishes to ask a question of a Minister at a particular sitting shall submit his or her name in advance to the Speaker who shall select 15 members by ballot.

(6) Each member selected shall submit his or her question to the Business Office, and the Business Office shall publish the questions on the penultimate Friday before the day they are due to be taken.

(7) The Speaker shall determine, by means of a random selection, the order in which questions are taken. However, the first question may not be from a member of the same party as the Minister to whom it is addressed, unless all the questions are from members of that party.

(8) Answers may not be debated, but the member asking the question may ask a supplementary question. Further supplementary questions may be asked at the discretion of the Speaker.

(9) Where —

(a) the member who submitted the question is not present to ask it; or

(b) the question is not reached in the time allocated for questions;

the Minister or member representing the Assembly Commission to whom the question is addressed shall give a written answer. This question and answer shall be published in the Official Report (Hansard).

(10) No question shall be taken outside the time allocated for questions except a question which has not been answered in consequence of the absence, in exceptional circumstances, of the Minister or member representing the Assembly Commission to whom it is addressed.

(11) Where a question or supplementary question is asked of the First Minister and deputy First Minister which relates to a matter in respect of which the junior Ministers in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister have been assigned a specific responsibility by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the First Minister or deputy First Minister, as appropriate, may call upon a junior Minister in OFMDFM to answer the question. The First Minister or deputy First Minister shall be present in the Chamber during the time for questions for oral answer.

20A. QUESTIONS FOR URGENT ORAL ANSWER

(1) A question for urgent oral answer may be taken if, in the opinion of the Speaker, it is of an urgent nature and relates to a matter of public importance.

(2) A member may ask a question on the day it is submitted if —

(a) it is submitted before 10.30 am; and

(b) the Minister or member representing the Assembly Commission to whom it is addressed is given a minimum of four hours' notice.

(3) Subject to paragraph (2)(b), the time for taking questions shall be at the discretion of the Speaker.

(4) Paragraphs (8) and (11) of Standing Order 20 shall apply to questions for urgent oral answer as they apply to questions for oral answer.

20B. QUESTIONS FOR WRITTEN ANSWER

(1) A member may submit up to five questions for written answer each working day, one of which may be for priority answer.

(2) Priority questions shall indicate whether an answer is sought within two, three, four or five working days.

(3) The Business Office shall publish all written questions.

(4) The Minister or member representing the Assembly Commission to whom a question is addressed shall answer it —

(a) by the end of ten clear working days after it is published; or

(b) in the case of a question for priority answer, by the end of two, three, four or five clear working days (as the case may be) after it is published.

(5) A question for priority answer should not request a large amount of historical or statistical information.

(6) The Minister or member representing the Assembly Commission to whom a written question is addressed shall cause the question and answer to be printed in the Official Report (Hansard)."

The following motions stood in the Order Paper:

(a) In Standing Order 10(2), leave out sub-paragraph (a) and insert —

"(a) there shall be a period for questions as set out in Standing Orders 20 and 20A;"

(b) In Standing Order 10(2), leave out sub-paragraph (c).

On behalf of the Committee, I propose that the Assembly approve the draft Standing Orders on Assembly questions.

The Committee on Procedures started an inquiry in September 2008, with its aim to investigate how to make Assembly questions more interesting, more lively and more topical. If the inquiry makes any progress at all on that, it should be welcomed, because, to be frank, the situation is not very good at present.

On Monday 30 March 2009, the Assembly debated and approved the Committee's report of its inquiry into Assembly questions. Given that the House approved the report, I do not intend to go over that debate again. My focus instead will be on the draft Standing Orders presented today.

Since the Assembly approved the report, the Committee has been working on drafting the Standing Orders to give effect to its recommendations. As well as amending Standing Orders, Members will wish to note that most of the report's recommendations will involve changes to working practices. Members and parties should prepare for those changes, and consult with the Business Office if they have any queries.

Members will also wish to note that two recommendations from the report are not contained in the

draft Standing Orders, because it was not appropriate that they should be. The recommendation that Departments develop a system of calculating the cost of answering questions is not covered. Neither is the recommendation that the Committee on Procedures occasionally review departmental performance.

Mr Neeson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order that no Order Papers are available in the Rotunda?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for raising that point of order. I can only apologise to the Member, and I will attempt to resolve the issue as soon as possible.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures: Members will be pleased that I do not intend to go over the draft Standing Orders in detail. The Assembly debated and approved that detail on 30 March, and I have nothing new to add. Instead, I will cover the new structure and the features of the draft Standing Orders.

What Members will notice first about the motions is that the Committee recommends a change to the structure of Assembly questions. Current Standing Order 19, which governs questions, is very unclear and difficult to read. It is structured to cover all types of question, written and oral, but makes no distinction between the two. The provision for both is mixed and mingled throughout. In fact, Standing Order 19, as it stands, is confused, disorganised, unclear in meaning and difficult to understand, not only for staff but for members of the public and MLAs. It not only lacks clarity and transparency but contains provisions that are incorrect.

In order to provide clarity and transparency, the Committee recommends a totally revised structure. The first element of that is a gateway provision in draft Standing Order 19 that provides for two types of question, oral and written. Draft Standing Order 19 then sets out the common factors in the two types of question, such as admissibility criteria, of whom questions can be asked, and how questions are printed in the Official Report.

The new structure then provides a new Standing Order to deal with questions for oral answer only, which is draft Standing Order 20. Draft Standing Order 20A is the next part of the new structure, and provides questions for urgent oral answer. That will replace the current Standing Order on private notice questions — PNQs — and has been renamed “Questions for urgent oral answer”. The title summarises, in plain English, what the Standing Order is about. The provisions of the current Standing Order have not been changed. However, the Committee hopes that the new wording is clearer and makes the procedure on questions for urgent oral answer more easily understandable.

The next part of the new structure is Standing Order 20B, which deals with questions for written answer. Members will note that the new Standing Orders cover

only essential provisions. It was never the Committee’s intention that the detail of how everything will work be included in Standing Orders. That detail will, of course, be available in the Business Office and in the guidance notes that Members can find on the Assembly intranet.

10.45 am

Motion (a) and motion (b) are consequential. Motion (a) is self-explanatory. It removes the time bands for oral questions from Standing Order 10, because they will now be in Standing Order 20. Motion (b) removes the restriction on urgent questions being taken immediately before the Adjournment debate. Sometimes it suits the Minister and Members to have an urgent question taken sooner than that. Therefore, we have removed that restriction.

I reiterate one important point that I made on behalf of the Committee during the debate on its report. Nothing is written in stone, nor is anything ever final in this place. If, in time, Members find that they do not like the new provisions, they should make that known to the Committee on Procedures through their party representatives. The Committee will, if necessary, reopen and explore each and every issue.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I reiterate what Lord Morrow said. The key words are plain English and common sense. The motions clarify something that is complex and sometimes difficult even for MLAs to understand. The Committee was in agreement on that. We wanted to make Question Time a focal point for the Assembly, which, unfortunately, did not seem to be the case. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr K Robinson: I welcome the proposals that Lord Morrow made on behalf of the Committee on Procedures. A great deal of hard work has gone into the matter. I draw Members’ attention to the Committee’s recommendations, particularly in the light of yesterday’s Question Time, when the Minister of Finance and Personnel reached question 20. That was a first for the House. Question 14 was in my name, so I did not expect to be called, and I had to fly by the seat of my pants in asking a supplementary question to keep the business going. However, that was the exception rather than the rule.

As Mickey Brady said, we have attempted to move procedures forward in a way that is helpful not only to Members, but to those who watch us on television. They should be able to see what we are trying to achieve. We are trying to bring the Chamber to life, and we are trying to give the public the opportunity to see that a tremendous amount of work goes on in Committees before we come here for Question Time.

I welcome the 10 recommendations. The First Minister and deputy First Minister should appear here more often, because they are representatives of the

Assembly, and we want to see them here in that role. The public deserve to see them in that role.

The recommendation on the use of questions for written answer is important, particularly with regard to priority questions. There is a feeling among Committee members, and, indeed, in the Chamber, that priority questions are, to a degree, sometimes abused. Their subject matter is not always a priority, and they tend to clutter things up. It is hoped that the recommendation to have one priority question while still allowing members to submit up to five questions for written answer a day reflects that situation.

The staggering of questions for oral answer to Ministers — two Ministers on Monday and one on Tuesday — is also helpful. I would hate to think that we were responding to the media's request for an extra slot on Tuesdays, and I would like to think that they will take the opportunity to realise what the Committee on Procedures has been trying to do. I hope that the media will give the Tuesday slot greater priority so that the public can receive more positive messages and can see what is going on in the Chamber.

We want to bring the Chamber to life. In the past, Ministers have spent considerable time reading prepared answers. Mr Speaker, you will recall that you reprimanded me when I wore the wrong spectacles and could not see what was going on. I was tempted to lift the paper to read it, but you spotted me. I hope that in future you will spot the Ministers so that they will not be tempted to read large sections from scripture, or from whatever it is that some of them read on occasions.

Mr Neeson: With joined-up writing.

Mr K Robinson: Yes, with joined-up writing.

I hope that the Committee's recommendations will help to streamline the proceedings of the House. On behalf of my party, I support the recommendations.

Mr O'Loan: There is certainly a significant problem with Question Time. Fundamentally, Question Time is about holding Ministers and the Assembly Commission to account. There is a wide perception that it is not effectively doing so, and that ties in with the lack of spontaneity and interest in our Question Time, as evidenced by the frequent low attendance of Members and the perceptions of the public about it. If it were effectively holding Ministers and the Assembly Commission to account, the interest would be there.

We see changes to Standing Orders as a useful move in the right direction. Therefore, we support the motions. However, we do not feel that that is the full answer to making Question Time really effective. We have some concerns, but we will see how it works in practice.

The process whereby Members' names are selected in advance, and only then can they submit questions, which are then subject to a further ballot, may work,

but that random process could produce freakish results, which might be deleterious to the interests of certain parties at certain times. We are vigilant about that, and will see how that works in practice. For the moment, we are interested in its going ahead to see how it operates in practice. We do not think, even if it works as best it can, that it will provide the full answer.

At Westminster and other places, there is a considerably wider variety of mechanisms for questions, and there is real opportunity for Members to hold Ministers to account. During Prime Minister's Questions, there is a nominal diary question followed by the opportunity for Members to put any question on any issue.

The concept of topical questions has recently been introduced. One of the problems is that our questions are submitted so far in advance. Although the motion to amend Standing Orders makes the timing of a question somewhat closer to the day on which it is taken, it is still separated by a considerable number of days. In other places, Members have the opportunity to ask a series of questions if they are not satisfied with the answer that they get. In future, such practices may well need to be brought in.

Mr McCarthy: I recall to Members yesterday's performance in the Chamber during Question Time when the Minister of Finance and Personnel was answering a question that I asked. As has been pointed out, a long response was given. I wanted to come back immediately, very briefly, on one point. I raised my voice, but unfortunately — and it was not the present Speaker — the man in the Chair cut me down and said "Order", so I could not respond to the Minister. That was grossly unfair. The Speaker and Deputy Speakers, in my opinion, do and should have some latitude to allow a Member to briefly respond to what a Minister said. Does the Member agree?

Mr O'Loan: There is no opportunity for a line of questioning to develop at any stage, which does not appear to be satisfactory.

We have concerns about the role of the junior Ministers, to whom the First Minister and deputy First Minister may surrender certain questions. The key point of Question Time is to hold the First Minister and deputy First Minister to account on their responsibilities.

There is an issue about the use of the words "specific responsibility" of the junior Ministers in the motion to amend the Standing Orders. We had that clearly analysed, and there is nothing in legislation or regulation that absolutely defines the specific responsibility of the junior Ministers. Theoretically, the First Minister and deputy First Minister could decide that morning that, for that day, a certain question would be the specific responsibility of a junior Minister. We would regard a situation such as that to be an abuse. We will be watching that very closely to ensure that there is no

attempt at an evasion of responsibilities by the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Finally, I want to comment, as other Members have, on the style of answers from Ministers, because it is every bit as big an issue as the nature of the questioning. Many Members are deeply unhappy with the style of answers provided by Ministers. Often, Ministers do not answer the question; they talk a lot, but very often they use that talk to evade, rather than answer, the question.

There seems to be no exercise of rule and regulation on that, whereas there is strict regulation around what Members do. Ministers repeatedly read out long scripts, even for supplementary questions, whereas Members must ask their supplementary questions without a script. If Ministers are competent to do their jobs, they should be capable of answering supplementary questions by drawing on their knowledge of their Departments. If that issue is not to be dealt with by the Speaker from the Chair, it ought to be dealt with behind the scenes. Ministers should be educated and lectured on their responsibilities to Members, which include giving concise responses that actually answer the questions that they are asked.

Mr Neeson: I am delighted to say that I now have two copies of the Order Paper.

I thank the Committee Clerk, the Committee staff, the Chairman and the Deputy Chairman for the way that they dealt with this very important issue. The draft Standing Orders are an attempt to make Question Time more interesting. If we are being honest, Question Time can sometimes be quite boring, and, bearing in mind that Question Time is one of the main things that the media focus on, it is important for us to make it more interesting and more topical.

The Committee report recommends a reduction in the number of questions to a Minister. Ministers regularly answer only five or six questions, so it makes sense to reduce to 15 the number of Members who can ask a Minister a question. Also, the new system of putting Members' names forward, rather than their questions, will help to make questions more topical by reducing their timescale.

The Committee received a lot of written evidence from various sources and heard oral evidence. We listened to what the press said. Holding Question Time on a Monday and a Tuesday will help to make the Assembly more relevant to the community at large. As Members know, the Commission is trying to improve the Assembly's outreach to the public and give them greater ownership of the Assembly, and these changes will help to do that.

A big regret that I have about the report is that it does not address the length of time that Ministers have to answer questions and the length of time that Assembly Members have to ask questions. That issue was discussed

in the Committee. For example, at Question Time yesterday, the deputy First Minister spent 12 minutes answering the first question, which, to me, was out of order. Members of the Commission visited the Canadian Parliament last year, where Members have 30 seconds to ask a question and Ministers have 30 seconds to answer. That is too little time, but the Committee should look at that again. The Speaker and the Deputy Speakers also have a responsibility to limit the amount of time that Members take to ask questions and the amount of time that Ministers take to answer them.

11.00 am

The Committee also addressed the issue of urgent and priority questions for written answer. That system has been abused totally. Members ask questions that I believe are of little importance, and the number of questions, even questions for written answer, that some submit puts enormous pressure on Departments. I ask Members to consider the amount of time that their questions take up, whether they are really relevant, and whether they are important to them.

There will always be people — Jim Allister, for example — who will include in their election manifestos the number of times that they appeared in the European Parliament and the number of questions that they asked. I only hope that Members are not asking questions simply to include that information in their election manifestoes.

As the Chairperson of the Committee said, the proposals are for consideration, and they are not written in tablets of stone. It is important that the Committee on Procedures considers how the new system will operate. Hopefully, it will be successful. In common with other Members, I support all the motions.

Mr Attwood: The Member who spoke previously said that the proposals will make Question Time more relevant, more interesting, and more topical. That Member, and others, will be sorely disappointed if they think that moving furniture will address the structural issues of Question Time. It might become marginally more topical, interesting and relevant, but it will not be relevant, topical and interesting in the way that it should be.

The one legacy of what has happened at Westminster over the past two or three weeks will be that there will be higher and deeper levels of accountability for politicians and political affairs. There will be new standards and higher accountability requirements from Ministers, individual Members, and political communities in general. The consequence of that legacy for any parliamentary body in these islands is that we will have to respond by demonstrating higher levels of accountability and by probing more deeply what our Ministers, our Executive, and what we ourselves do or do not do.

That should be the touchstone and the standard against which we judge this report and how we go forward. If we think that the proposals will rewrite and reconfigure our Question Time in a way that lives up to the new standards that will be required of us, we will be sorely disappointed.

For all those reasons, I concur with Declan O'Loan. Indeed, I will go somewhat further. In my view, Question Time needs radical structural surgery and radical changes in how it is managed from the Speaker's Chair. If we do not go down the parallel paths of radical structural surgery and radical re-management of Question Time, we will come up short.

I endorse Mr O'Loan's comments about the structural changes to Question Time that I think need to be considered. There should be two Question Times each week: one on Mondays and one on Tuesdays.

Only two Ministers should answer questions on Mondays and Tuesdays, and questions to each Minister should last for 45 minutes. The Assembly's experience over the past two years shows the folly of the notion that one Minister can be properly probed in 30 minutes and that three Ministers can be properly probed in 90 minutes. However, making changes would only open the opportunity for accountability.

Assembly Question Time will not be made relevant, interesting and topical unless, as Declan O'Loan outlined, topical questions can be submitted at very late notice. It will not be made relevant, interesting and topical unless, as with the Westminster model, all questions are diary questions about which Ministers, especially the First Minister and deputy First Minister, have not been given notice. Question Time will not have the necessary spontaneity and contemporaneity unless it takes place more often, on different days and each session is longer and comprises topical and diary questions.

I urge Members to watch BBC Parliament — we are all anoraks in one way or another — to see how Question Time is conducted in the Scottish Parliament. Question Time here and Question Time in the Scottish Parliament are like chalk and cheese. Question Time in the Scottish Parliament has energy, relevance, exchange and emotion. Depending on the character and quality of Ministers and Members of the Scottish Parliament, it can even be captivating.

We need structural changes that provide opportunities to test the mettle of Ministers and Members. Ministers need to know what it is like to be subject to hard accountability, and Members need to know what it is like to exercise hard accountability. Let us be honest: our Question Time is all about soft accountability. Rather than there being proper exchanges, Question Time is stacked in favour of Ministers who can control how, and for how long, points are made. Structural

changes will not alter the culture and nature of our Question Time unless there is a revision of how Question Time is managed from the Speaker's Chair.

The Speaker, whoever that may be at any time, must allow supplementary probing of a Minister. If a Minister is reading from a prepared script and is clearly not answering a question that has been asked on an issue of heightened public interest or topical merit, the Speaker should allow a further supplementary question to be asked to put that Minister under the spotlight.

If the Minister measures up, and the Member does not measure up, that is fine and good. However, that process would at least put us all in a better position and make Ministers and Members more accountable to the public in their performance at Question Time. To change the culture and to create a sense of accountability, questions to each Minister should last for 45 minutes.

I want to endorse some of the comments that were made today and reiterate some of the points that I have made on the Floor in the past. On one occasion, a Minister gave an answer that went on for three minutes and 20 seconds. Yesterday, without prejudice to the importance of the issue, one discussion during Question Time lasted for 12 minutes. At no stage whatsoever were Ministers told to bring their remarks to a close, to answer the question or to stop repeating the answer.

Some weeks ago, a Minister stood up and answered a question and then proceeded to give the same answer, verbatim, in response to a supplementary question. Not once was that Minister called to account for repeating herself, for duplication or for not adding anything to the question.

There must be more control from the Speaker's Chair and more pushing of Members and Ministers. I do not mind being called to account by the Speaker when I stray beyond the limits of a certain question, which I do with regularity, but if Ministers give the same answers time after time, why are they not told to move on or to add to what they have just said? That is what they do, and that is the culture and character of our Question Time.

If politicians are to measure up to the new standards of public expectation, which will be a theme for years to come, we must radically reshape our Question Time in a way that sets new standards for other Assemblies and Parliaments on these islands. The Speaker and the Deputy Speakers must protect the authority and integrity of the House by not allowing Ministers to talk endlessly, add nothing to debates and repeat themselves without ever being told to move on.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures:

I am not sure what to make of some of today's speeches, but I will go through what some folk have said. Some speeches have been interesting and some

have been, at times, downright hypocritical, but I suppose that is the nature of the set-up here.

Ken Robinson raised a query in relation to questions for priority written answer, and I think that he is absolutely right. There is no doubt that questions for priority written answer are abused to such an extent that they have become meaningless, and that practice must stop. However, I do not see the Committee on Procedures having a role in stopping that abuse; that is a role for others.

Ken Robinson also referred to the Tuesday slot. He emphasised that we are not responding to the media, and that is correct. We have included the Tuesday slot because we believe that it is the right thing to do and that there is a lot of common sense in it. Therefore, after many long deliberations, the Committee decided that it should be given a try. We are doing it simply because we feel that it is the right thing to do.

Declan O'Loan's speech was a different kettle of fish, because he sees a lot of bogeymen in here. He sees everyone who is not in the SDLP as suspicious, devious and downright dangerous. He thinks that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) is out to get him. It may be out to get him, and it may have some justification for doing so, but he would be far better off not wasting everyone's time, including his own, with silly, trivial, political nonsense.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures: Yes, I will give way when I am finished.

Mr O'Loan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Lord Morrow is speaking as Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures. He is presenting opinion that I do not recall being agreed by the Committee, and it seems to be personal in its nature. Will the Speaker advise whether it is appropriate for the Chairperson to do that?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order, but there must be some honesty in the House. Every Member who is a member of the Committee on Procedures has gone slightly outside the remit of the Committee this morning. It is only right and proper that Lord Morrow, as Chairperson of the Committee, be allowed to respond to the debate, to make a winding-up speech and to conclude on it.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures: I will take that as a licence to get on with it.

Mr O'Loan is bitterly disappointed that the junior Ministers have not been given a greater role. Had the junior Ministers been given a greater role, it would have given him an opportunity to dance round these desks and say that this is horrendous.

However, the Committee again insisted that OFMDFM could nominate a junior Minister to answer

questions related to their area of responsibility, provided that the First Minister and deputy First Minister attend. Mr O'Loan was hoping for a different outcome that would allow him to shoot a whole lot of foxes. His foxes were shot long ago. Therefore, he should just sit down.

11.15 am

Mr McCarthy said he was bitterly disappointed at the way he was treated by the Speaker. That has nothing to do with procedures. I have noticed that there has been a lot of criticism today of the Speaker and his role. Any Member with such criticisms should bring them directly to the Speaker rather than standing here and trotting out all this nonsense, which, frankly, amounts to nothing more than political point-scoring and is of no substance.

Mr Neeson tried to bring some sanity to the debate. He raised an interesting point about the length of time taken in asking and answering questions. I agree with him on that. There is something dreadfully wrong when a Minister has 30 or 40 foolscap pages of notes with which to subject the House to an answer. Perhaps, Ministers should sometimes be told that Members have heard enough and still not got an answer, so we assume that the question is not going to be answered and the Minister should just sit down. However, that is also a matter for the Speaker rather than the Procedures Committee. All criticism directed at the Speaker and his staff should be taken directly to him.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures: Of course, why would I not?

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. This issue has been brought up regularly at the Business Committee, of which he and I are members. The Speaker has clearly, openly and repeatedly told us that he does not have any control over how Ministers perform in the Chamber. Where do we go from here? Who controls how Ministers respond and the length of time that they take? There is an obvious problem of who is in charge of Ministers when they answer questions.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures: Maybe the Speaker feels that he has no control over what happens at Question Time and whether Ministers take one minute or 101 minutes to answer a question. There is at least the consolation that they cannot go over 30 minutes at present.

Mr Neeson is right: Question Time has become horrendously boring, hence the poor turnout of Members. The motion is an honest attempt to put that right. I know that the prophets in the SDLP tell us that it will fail. That is fair enough; we have heard it all before from them — it will not go anywhere, it will fail again, they know.

However, I recall a Question Time in the House that did not involve the present incumbents of OFMDFM; there were two other ministers from two other parties. I can tell Members that they were equally boring. The House may not want to accept that it was a tragedy to listen to them as well. If Members believe that nothing is any better, I can console them with the fact that nothing is any worse than what we have had.

That fount of all knowledge Mr Attwood, who brings as much clarity to a subject as an elephant would bring to a china shop, said that he was sceptical. Well, there is nothing new there. That is why he is in the Assembly. He then said that the new Standing Orders would make no significant difference. Frankly, I do not know how the SDLP operates. Maybe that party has got the wrong person on the Procedures Committee, but that is its decision, not ours. It is a pity that these people in the SDLP who have all this knowledge of how things should be done did not implement it when they were in a position to do so. That is why they are not in the position today that they once were—they were caught on.

You come here and lecture us on how altogether differently things must be done, but that should be heard in the Committee. I look forward to your joining the Committee, bringing all these suggestions and leading from the front. It is easy to come to the Chamber and rip everything apart, which you have endeavoured to do today, and tell us that nothing will change.

You also talked about the culture of Question Time here. What you said may be true, but I am doubtful. You are not often right, and I think that you are wrong again. You said that you were bored stiff by our Question Time, but its culture is what it is.

In addition, I noticed that you were quite critical of OFMDFM. If the First Minister and deputy First Minister were to come here with gold bars, you would probably think that something must be wrong because they came from OFMDFM. You are convinced that whatever comes out of that office cannot be right.

Question Time is too long. It is not right that a Minister can read foolscap after foolscap in response to a question without anybody saying anything about it. I am not talking about OFMDFM—you have a Minister also. I suspect that, as far as you are concerned, she is the only perfect one and gets everything right all the time. However, we cannot all be perfect. Therefore—

Mr Attwood: Will the Member give way?

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Order. Before Mr Attwood speaks, I remind all Members that they must address their remarks through the Chair.

Mr Attwood: I was very careful not to mention any Minister by name or by office in my entire speech. On

one occasion, I went as far as referring to “she” or “her”, but that could apply to a number of Ministers. I was very careful because my comments, to a greater or lesser extent, apply across the ministerial teams. I hope that the Member will accept that.

There is a contradiction in what Lord Morrow said because, according to him, Question Time was “horrendously boring”. That went a lot further than anything that I said about Question Time. I made criticisms and comments, but I did not describe it as horrendously boring. Those are Lord Morrow’s words.

He went on to say that Question Time is no better or worse than it was before. That does not answer the question of how it could be better in the future. In his replies, the Member should examine some of the proposals that Declan O’Loan and I broadly outlined and evaluate whether they will work. I suggest that Lord Morrow should look at those and assess whether we can build on what was proposed today to make Question Time bigger, better and more interesting and relevant to the public.

Mr Speaker: That was a very long intervention. I have reminded Members in the past that interventions should be short, sharp and to the point. They should be courteous to this House and to the Member who gave way. I have continually said that in this House.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures: Not only was the Member’s intervention very long, it was also very boring.

Concerns have also been raised about the submitted questions. I read some questions that are submitted, and there is no doubt that the answers could easily be attained by lifting the telephone and ringing, for instance, a section engineer in Roads Service. Sean Neeson touched on the issue of Members submitting questions and then stating, on their next piece of election material, that they had asked 2,000 or 22,000 questions in the Assembly. That may be the aim and objective of some MLAs, but the aim and objective of any MLA should not be to submit a number of questions. Rather, it should be to get an answer about an important issue that affects their constituents. Sometimes, the quicker way to get an answer is simply to lift the telephone rather than submit a question.

Despite the scepticism that we have heard today, the Committee’s proposals are an honest attempt to improve the way forward. I hope that all Members will give them a fair wind, and I think that most of them will. There are those who have set their faces against anything that is progressive in here. Instead, they want to be as negative and destructive as possible. However, that is their way of doing things, and we will have to live with that.

Furthermore, I want to place on record my appreciation of the work of the Committee Clerk,

Committee staff and, indeed, Committee members, who give up a great deal of their time to deal with each matter in turn to bring the proposals to the House. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Speaker: Having listened to the debate, I must inform Members that I regularly receive letters, including some from Members, concerning many of the issues that were raised about the House's business and Question Time. Unfortunately, when I ask to meet Members to discuss those issues, such meetings do not happen. I am happy to meet any Member who raised an issue in the debate. I operate an open-door policy. In fact, Members do not even require an appointment to meet me, so I reiterate my offer to Members from all sides of the House to come to talk to me.

I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

(c) Leave out Standing Orders 19 and 20 and insert –

“19. QUESTIONS

(1) A member may ask questions of —

(a) a Minister, on matters relating to the Minister's official responsibilities;

(b) a member representing the Assembly Commission, on matters relating to the Commission's official responsibilities.

(2) A question should not contain —

(a) statements of facts or names of persons, unless they are necessary to make the question intelligible and can be authenticated;

(b) arguments, inferences or imputations;

(c) adjectives, unless they are necessary to make the question intelligible;

(d) ironical expressions;

(e) hypothetical matter; or

(f) requests for expressions of opinion, legal or otherwise.

(3) A question may be —

(a) for oral answer (see Standing Order 20);

(b) for urgent oral answer (see Standing Order 20A); or

(c) for written answer (see Standing Order 20B).

(4) A question must —

(a) be in writing;

(b) indicate the type of answer sought, within the meaning of paragraph (3);

(c) be submitted to the Business Office by the member, or by the person authorised in writing by the member;

(d) be submitted by hand, by post, by email or by fax.

(5) A question must be answered as clearly and as fully as possible.

20. QUESTIONS FOR ORAL ANSWER

(1) Questions for oral answer for Ministers shall be taken between —

(a) 2.30 pm and 3.30 pm on those Mondays; and

(b) 3.00 pm and 3.30 pm on those Tuesdays;

on which the Assembly is sitting. Where questions for members representing the Assembly Commission are to be taken, they shall be taken after questions for Ministers.

(2) If for any reason the Assembly does not sit on a day when questions for oral answer would normally be taken, the Speaker may allocate additional time for questions on the nearest day when the Assembly does sit.

(3) The Speaker shall from time to time consult the Business Committee on the need to provide additional time for questions.

(4) A rota, agreed by the Business Committee, shall determine who should answer questions on a particular day.

(5) A member who wishes to ask a question of a Minister at a particular sitting shall submit his or her name in advance to the Speaker who shall select 15 members by ballot.

(6) Each member selected shall submit his or her question to the Business Office, and the Business Office shall publish the questions on the penultimate Friday before the day they are due to be taken.

(7) The Speaker shall determine, by means of a random selection, the order in which questions are taken. However, the first question may not be from a member of the same party as the Minister to whom it is addressed, unless all the questions are from members of that party.

(8) Answers may not be debated, but the member asking the question may ask a supplementary question. Further supplementary questions may be asked at the discretion of the Speaker.

(9) Where —

(a) the member who submitted the question is not present to ask it; or

(b) the question is not reached in the time allocated for questions;

the Minister or member representing the Assembly Commission to whom the question is addressed shall give a written answer. This question and answer shall be published in the Official Report (Hansard).

(10) No question shall be taken outside the time allocated for questions except a question which has not been answered in consequence of the absence, in exceptional circumstances, of the Minister or member representing the Assembly Commission to whom it is addressed.

(11) Where a question or supplementary question is asked of the First Minister and deputy First Minister which relates to a matter in respect of which the junior Ministers in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister have been assigned a specific responsibility by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the First Minister or deputy First Minister, as appropriate, may call upon a junior Minister in OFMDFM to answer the question. The First Minister or deputy First Minister shall be present in the Chamber during the time for questions for oral answer.

20A. QUESTIONS FOR URGENT ORAL ANSWER

(1) A question for urgent oral answer may be taken if, in the opinion of the Speaker, it is of an urgent nature and relates to a matter of public importance.

(2) A member may ask a question on the day it is submitted if —

(a) it is submitted before 10.30 am; and

(b) the Minister or member representing the Assembly Commission to whom it is addressed is given a minimum of four hours' notice.

(3) Subject to paragraph (2)(b), the time for taking questions shall be at the discretion of the Speaker.

(4) Paragraphs (8) and (11) of Standing Order 20 shall apply to questions for urgent oral answer as they apply to questions for oral answer.

20B. QUESTIONS FOR WRITTEN ANSWER

(1) A member may submit up to five questions for written answer each working day, one of which may be for priority answer.

(2) Priority questions shall indicate whether an answer is sought within two, three, four or five working days.

(3) The Business Office shall publish all written questions.

(4) The Minister or member representing the Assembly Commission to whom a question is addressed shall answer it —

(a) by the end of ten clear working days after it is published; or

(b) in the case of a question for priority answer, by the end of two, three, four or five clear working days (as the case may be) after it is published.

(5) A question for priority answer should not request a large amount of historical or statistical information.

(6) The Minister or member representing the Assembly Commission to whom a written question is addressed shall cause the question and answer to be printed in the Official Report (Hansard)."

Resolved (with cross-community support):

(a) In Standing Order 10(2), leave out sub-paragraph (a) and insert —

"(a) there shall be a period for questions as set out in Standing Orders 20 and 20A;" — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Morrow).*]

Resolved (with cross-community support):

(b) In Standing Order 10(2), leave out sub-paragraph (c). — [*The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Morrow).*]

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Royal Mail

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.

Lord Browne: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the proposals by the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform who plans a "joint venture" between a foreign private operator and Royal Mail; objects to this proposal as it would not guarantee the necessary investment into the UK postal industry; and supports the Communication Workers Union campaign to 'Keep the Post Public'.

I support the motion, which asserts the Assembly's objection to the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform's proposal for a joint venture between a foreign, private operator and Royal Mail. Moreover, I support the Communication Workers Union's (CWU) 'Keep the Post Public' campaign.

In Westminster, the Postal Services Bill [HL] is being debated, and although postal services are a reserved matter, I believe firmly that it is only right and proper that the Assembly make its view on the subject known, because the Bill could seriously impinge on the level of service that Royal Mail provides in Northern Ireland.

There is no doubt that Royal Mail is facing a critical situation, which, as we know, is due partly to the electronic age and partly to greater competition. For 2008-09, Royal Mail estimates an 8% drop in the volume of mail that it will physically handle. I am sure that we all agree that it is essential for Royal Mail to be modernised, because the company must secure its long-term future.

For that to be achieved, it is essential that Royal Mail works closely alongside the Communication Workers Union to negotiate the change and to develop new products and services for customers. It is vital that Royal Mail remains 100% publicly owned, with a new board and management team committed to delivering a successful, modern, public enterprise.

11.30 am

Contrary to some reports, Royal Mail has made great progress recently. All sections of the organisation are now in profit, and, in the last eight months of last year, it made £225 million. It hopes to double that profit in the coming financial year. I do not believe that the 30% equity share that is proposed will work. If one accepts 30% part privatisation, I am sure that it will lead to full privatisation eventually.

The UK postal industry is unique. It delivers to every address in the United Kingdom, regardless of location, six days a week and with the same postal charges from Northern Ireland to a mainland address as between two addresses that are close to each other. I am concerned that if a foreign, private operator takes up the 30% equity, the level of service and pricing in Northern Ireland will suffer. Indeed, the private operator may deem not to take on delivery here because of our geographical location. For example, in its own country, TNT Post delivers only two days a week, and its charge for delivering a 50 g letter is twice the price that Royal Mail charges. At present, our prices are among the lowest in the world and our quality of service the best in any like-for-like postal service. If TNT or any foreign provider were to come in, one could not guarantee that the pricing would be on an equal basis; it could cost a lot more to post a letter from Northern Ireland to Southampton, for example.

It seems strange to talk about privatisation in the current economic climate when we are nationalising our banks. It is interesting to note that the French have put on hold their plans for privatising their postal services and that Denmark is taking back the section that it privatised a number of years ago. Those countries are doing the opposite of what is proposed for Royal Mail.

People rely on sending and receiving a wide range of correspondence through the post, including hospital appointments, legal documents, dare I say it, electoral material, and all manner of financial statements. It is important to remember that, though we live in the age of electronics and the Internet, not everyone has access to the Internet, especially the more vulnerable people in society. Those people particularly rely on an efficient and cost-effective postal service.

So far, I have concentrated on the issue of the fear of Royal Mail being privatised. It has been hard to escape the unhelpful media coverage that has emerged. However, I was content with the comments made by the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, Lord Mandelson, during the Second Reading of the Postal Services Bill [HL] approximately two months ago, when he said that he could not agree more with the Communication Workers Union's campaign to "Keep the Post Public".

It is important that the interests of stakeholders and, more importantly, service users are not only raised, but become part of the consultation process that Ofcom should go through when carrying out its assessment. It is essential that Royal Mail's performance, or that of any future provider, can be scrutinised effectively by a statutory watchdog for the postal sector, namely, Consumer Focus.

Consumer Focus came into being late last year, and it is important that it plays a strong role in the regulation of our postal service. Furthermore, Royal Mail should provide a postal watchdog that makes available a range of information that shows how well it is delivering universal post and other services, and details how successfully it is meeting its service targets. It is important that Royal Mail be aware that a fair, open and independent method of adjudication is available to it should something go wrong.

I agree with CWU's view that there is a positive future for Royal Mail if it delivers greater investment, exploits new technologies, adapts to market changes and provides better products and services for its customers. I also agree that it should remain 100% publicly owned. The vast majority of the public does not want the Government to privatise part of Royal Mail, and I trust that the Assembly will send out a clear message that it wishes to keep the postal service in public hands. It is also important that we support the CWU in its efforts to achieve a fully modernised public service. It is vital that we maintain that service in Northern Ireland so that we can post letters at the same prices available to people in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an rúin seo inniu.

I support the motion, and I declare an interest as someone who is on a career break from the postal service. I would like to think that there will be an opportunity for me to go back to the postal service in a couple of years' time, if I am not selected to stand or if I am not successful in the next Assembly election.

I do not want to be overindulgent or mention people's names, but I pay tribute to the staff of the postal service and to people in rural communities who rely heavily on that service. During my time in the postal service, I had the pleasure of working in the likes of Ballymoyer, Whitecross, Kingsmill, Keady and Derrynoose. I also pay tribute to my fellow workers in the office in Armagh city, who will be out today in their shorts and T-shirts. Many's the day I went out in a raincoat, but, thankfully, the weather is good for them today. The outworkings of the Postal Services Bill [HL] will affect those people who are providing a front line service.

The Postal Services Bill [HL] has three main aims: to privatise Royal Mail through a strategic partner; to remove the pensions deficit; and to reform the regulation of postal services. There is agreement on the part of, among others, the CWU, on two of those aims. The huge pensions deficit is a result of a holiday in pensions contributions between 1990 and 2003. Postal workers continued to make their contributions throughout that period, but their employer, supported by successive Governments, was allowed a free run.

The pensions deficit has built up and is a huge burden on the company. Each year for the next 14 years, the company has to pay an extra £280 million to cover the deficit. All parties who contribute to the debate should and will recognise that that burden must be removed. The Government have to take seriously their responsibility to postal workers. We must reject any attempts to use the pensions deficit as a bargaining tool for privatisation. No private company would take on the postal service with such a deficit, so we must avoid a situation in which the public would be taking on the debt while the profit is privatised.

Once the deficit is removed, finances will be transformed. The mail service will have an additional £280 million capital a year for modernisation, new services and improvements of conditions for postal workers. Equally, the reform of the regulator is uncontroversial. There is a debate about how Ofcom can best take over the role of Postcomm, but no one is opposing that move on principle.

The main problem that I have with the Postal Services Bill [HL] is its stance on privatisation. When Departments are told to achieve efficiencies, it leads to a reduction in front line services and, ultimately, job losses. That will happen under privatisation, and we will not support that.

The Government commissioned the Hooper Report on the future of Royal Mail. Hooper supported privatisation, and, without any hesitation or public debate on the report, the Government endorsed that position. As time passes, the analysis of the Hooper Report has not fared well.

Hooper insisted that Royal Mail was less profitable and less efficient than other European postal services, hence the need for privatisation. However, results for the financial year 2008-09 show that Royal Mail doubled its profits in that period. TNT, the Government's favourite bidder, saw its profits decline by 58%. Deutsche Post and other services that are supposedly superior to Royal Mail went into the red to the tune of €2 billion.

The quality of service targets for Royal Mail are quite rigorous, yet, on 29 May, Royal Mail announced that it had met all its first-class, second-class and business bulk-mail targets for the year. The same was true for standard parcels and European international mail. Of course the postal service needs to be modernised. For decades, it has suffered from underinvestment, and, as a consequence, does not have the same levels of mechanisation as the other companies that I mentioned. That can be put right while still keeping Royal Mail in the public sector.

The Bill also proposes separating Post Office counter services from Royal Mail, which would be a damaging move. The local Post Office branch is the

access point for the universal service for many customers, especially those in rural communities. If Royal Mail's relationship with counter services is broken, the future of Post Office branches will be less secure. The position whereby management policy for Royal Mail is decided solely by management in London is not responsive to the needs of customers here.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Boylan: I support the motion. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Members who tabled the motion.

Royal Mail and Post Office services throughout Northern Ireland are an integral part of our society. Those services are one of the community focuses that still remain in our society. I want a balance to be struck between a good delivery service and a service that people can access and use. Striking that balance is difficult. A huge problem, especially in rural areas, is that some post offices do not offer the services that the citizens in their area require. If post offices do not offer the appropriate services, people will not use them, and we must focus our attention on that problem.

It is right to have a frank and pragmatic debate on the changes to Royal Mail that may be necessary in the future. We must look for a positive outcome; there is no point in having change for the sake of it. I have heard much about Royal Mail's losing out on significant potential profits through not using Internet technology, and that issue must be addressed. However, we must also acknowledge that many people who rely on Royal Mail and Post Office services, particularly elderly people, cannot use the Internet. Therefore, we need and deserve a universal service that can be accessed and be used by all. That is crucial.

We also must ensure that the postal delivery services are not diminished. People in rural communities are concerned that they could be left with a postal service that delivers to their house only once a week, while the rest of the week they would be expected to collect their mail from the local post office. I do not want that to happen; that outcome must be resisted at all costs.

We must maintain the service for customers, particularly the elderly. Usage of the card account should be increased, because that is where business can be directed within Royal Mail and Post Office services. We must balance the need to create an economically viable and sustainable service with the need to maintain a service that remains at heart a public service.

I am sure that every Member is aware of the financial difficulties that face the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive.

11.45 am

The catastrophic mistakes made by the Labour Government have led to their, and our, options being reduced substantially. The Royal Mail is in the strain of public resources. It has been underfunded for decades, and that is now reaching critical levels. The pension deficit alone, which has been mentioned, is costing the Government somewhere in the region of £280 million a year. Far too much of the Royal Mail is not automated. It is inefficient and it needs to be modernised.

I am open to any suggestions as to how we change the Royal Mail while maintaining its universality and its ethos. The Ulster Unionist Party is not dogmatic about how it achieves a positive outcome. At the moment, the Royal Mail is in public hands, but it is struggling. The Labour Government have gone on the rampage and closed in excess of 4,000 local post offices throughout the UK, and that is not good for post offices or for the community that we live in.

There is no magic solution. A pragmatic approach is required. I share some of the concerns that Members have outlined. The Labour Government are proposing to sell off a 30% stake in Royal Mail. However, it is becoming clear that they will not reach the £3 billion that they had hoped for. Additionally, the number of potential investors appears to have diminished, bringing into question whether the investment will be what is really needed. There is a concern that private investors will not maintain the ethos and principles of the Royal Mail. If privatisation of any kind goes ahead, the taxpayer and the public coffers must not lose out, and the ethos of Royal Mail must be maintained.

Mr Attwood: I thank Lord Browne for proposing the motion, not least because it is one of those issues that not only must be won, but is now winnable. Those elements of the draft legislation that offend against all the principles that other Members have outlined can be defeated.

The first reason why it is winnable is because there is such a Labour revolt in Westminster over the issue; secondly, Gordon Brown is in a position of weakness, which may be compounded by the end of this week; and, thirdly, the political and wider community understand that this is a representative moment. If we do not defeat those who wish to partly or fully privatise public services — especially in the current economic situation, where the British Government are in huge debt, which people will have to pay off for decades — other public services will be vulnerable, especially if there is a Tory Government. Those are the reasons why it is winnable and why it is important that it must be won.

The British Government have at least three — although there are many more — fundamental fault

lines in their draft legislation. The first is the principle in the legislation that in order to modernise a publicly owned organisation, one has to sell off one third of it. That is a perverted principle in the management of public assets. As Mr Boylan said, it is contradicted by the fact that, in a time of recession when other private mail firms are recording reduced profits or even losses, the Royal Mail has announced in the past two weeks that significant profits are being made, and that all sectors of its organisation are in the black. One commentator said:

“Part-privatisation of Royal Mail makes no political or organisational sense, we now know it makes no financial sense.”

The second fault line, which has also been mentioned, is the principle of a service for all at all times. We know in our guts, and we know from past privatisations of public assets, that privatisation interferes with the level of service provided. The principle of a six-day service for all, which has informed the Royal Mail for decades, will be vulnerable in the event of part privatisation. From experience in Europe, we know that when that happens, we could end up with the worst situation: a service for all for just two days a week in any part of one territory.

The third fundamental principle that I find offensive and particularly threatening is that in order to rationalise and improve the service of a public asset, one must bring in outside managerial experience. As one Member observed, if we apply that model to its logical conclusion, we will have the situation in which other publicly owned assets, such as the National Health Service, would have to be part-privatised in order to bring in outside expert management. That is the sinister and worrying principle behind part of this legislation. It assumes that a public service cannot re-create itself and buy in expertise. Lord Mandelson believes that a public service can only reconfigure itself if part of it is sold to the private sector. That is a serious principle, which we must guard against. We must defeat that part of the legislation in the House of Commons.

I wish to comment on the role of Postcomm, which has essentially given these proposals a fair wind and very substantial backing. I draw my conclusions about Postcomm from what it did when post offices were being closed in the North only a short while ago; it served the business aims of the Government rather than those of the public and marginalised communities. I will not rely on its judgement in this matter.

Mr Ford: I thank Lord Browne and his colleagues for bringing the matter before the House. However, I suspect that we will not be taken much notice of; given the way this legislation stands in Westminster.

It is absolutely clear, and I do not need to rehash the statistics supplied by others, that Royal Mail Group

and the closely associated Post Office Ltd have been in significant financial difficulties for some years. We welcome the appearance of a return to profit but we have no guarantee that that will continue in the long term. Therefore, it is understandable that consideration has been given to different ways of managing the service and getting the necessary capital investment into it.

We can all be extremely grateful that some of the proposals made a while ago, which would have seen total privatisation, have been defeated. However, Royal Mail's major problem at the moment is the way that large sections of the core business have been drained away. That has allowed private operators to take the easy part of the business, at an excessive proportion of the price of the stamp, and leave it to Royal Mail to carry out the expensive part: the door-to-door delivery of mail.

I regard myself as a fan of Royal Mail, and I try to throw it some business every year. However, yesterday, in South Antrim, I saw election material for a political party involved in the European election bearing the stamp of one of the private operators. Therefore, it was clearly being delivered in a way that was detrimental to the long-term interests of Royal Mail. That was unfortunate. I will not embarrass the party that did it, except to say that members of the DUP, SDLP and Sinn Féin do not need to worry — and it was not my party either.

In an ideal world, the Treasury would produce the necessary capital for the sort of investment that we have seen at Mallusk in recent years to enable proper efficiency in the sorting and delivery of mail. The Treasury has provided such capital in the past. That sort of investment needs to be made in other parts of the UK to bring them up to the standards here. There is no doubt that delivery records in Northern Ireland are better than those in other regions. Unfortunately, there is great doubt as to where the capital will come from. Press reports yesterday suggest that it may not come easily from the private sector.

At the beginning of my speech, I said that I doubt that we can change things through this Assembly debate. The key thing that we cannot change is the Treasury's accounting rules, which is where the real issue resides. Until steps are taken there, we will be stuck, and we will face difficult issues. Across the range of Royal Mail and Post Office services, we have seen the positive aspect of genuine public-private partnership.

Local sub-post offices have been successful because they combine the public service ethos of Royal Mail and the Post Office Ltd with the entrepreneurial ability of local shopkeepers and businessmen. The fact that a large group of people, including me, was able to play a small part in saving Parkhall post office in Antrim last

year is an indication of the high regard in which privately managed sub-post offices are held. Therefore, the issue about whether something is public or private is not entirely simplistic.

Evidence has clearly shown that public-private partnerships work well; however, no evidence exists to suggest that they are any worse. Indeed, evidence on the ground has shown that the sort of public-private partnerships used in sub-post offices work in a genuine way, unlike the sort that was used for hospital privatisations, which are in no sense partnerships and which are now going wrong.

It is interesting that many Members today dwelt on the issue of the universal service obligation. That must be the key factor for us. A private company might want to set up a distribution network in a city the size of Belfast. However, for the vast majority of people living in smaller towns and rural areas in Northern Ireland, it is absolutely clear that the threat to the universal service obligation is a threat to each and every one of us. The Assembly has a real role to play in addressing that issue. We must keep the focus on the universal service obligation to ensure that the public service ethos is what matters in Royal Mail, regardless of the precise management style that will be imposed by the new legislation that is going through Westminster.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion, and hearing other Members express their support has been heartening. The Bill that the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, Peter Mandelson, proposed has started a legislative timetable that envisages the sale of up to 30% of Royal Mail by the summer.

The shoart tim' scale is in hitsel' indicative o' the fact at thair wus mair ahin thon than maits the ee. Knawin hoo lang hit taks maist things tae pass through the haas o' Westminster, onithing at bes tried this quaak caas fer note an' mebbe consairn. Hits aye the caase es bes cleir noo at privatisation bes bad eneuch bit quhan added tae foreign investment hit leuks laike the enn o' the Royal Mail

The short timescale, in itself, was indicative of the fact that there was more to the Bill than meets the eye. I know how long it takes for most legislation to pass through the halls of Westminster. Anything that is attempted so quickly is certainly worth noting and, as is certain in this case, is a possible cause for concern. It is clear that the part-privatisation of Royal Mail is bad enough; however, teaming that with foreign investment seems to signal the end for Royal Mail.

We have seen that privatisation is not always a good thing. In fact, we have learnt that it is not usually good in the long term. In most cases, there is little or no accountability or long-term benefit, and as such, any

request for privatisation must be seriously considered, with the onus on the privateers, as I believe some of them to be, to prove that the service will be better in the long run.

The consensus is that the public are not in favour of privatisation. Indeed, constituents of all ages have told me that they are outraged at the suggestion and that they want me to express that outrage in whatever way I can as their elected representative. That is why my name is beside this motion in the Order Paper and why the motion is being debated in the Assembly today.

A political blogger for 'The Guardian' online discussed the results of a PoliticsHome survey in which 65% of voters — a timely reminder for us all — opposed Mr Mandelson's Royal Mail privatisation plan. The blogger said:

"PoliticsHome has released a poll suggesting 65% of voters are opposed to Mandelson's plans, with only 24% are in favour.

This is a proper poll, not just one of the PoliticsHome surveys of Westminster opinion. Tory voters are marginally more in favour than Labour or Lib Dem ones, but even they are against partial privatisation by a margin of two to one."

The Communication Workers Union's recent campaign and poll also showed that the vast majority of the public do not want the Government to part-privatise Royal Mail. In a phone poll of people across the UK, which is also applicable to the current situation, 75% of those questioned disagreed with privatisation and 33% strongly disagreed. However, when the issue of foreign ownership was mentioned, which is clearly the thrust of the motion, the percentage that disagreed rose to 89%, and the percentage that strongly disagreed rose to 58%. Only 6% of those polled said that they were in favour of privatisation, and that percentage halved to 3% when sale to a foreign company was mentioned. That is a dramatic statement and speaks volumes about public opinion.

I have been in close contact with postal workers who have said that Royal Mail should remain a wholly public utility and that they are unconvinced that any form of privatisation, part or otherwise, would not adversely affect the universal service obligation that every post code is guaranteed a postal delivery six days a week. Every Member has hit on that point.

That is of particular significance to the people of Northern Ireland. We are unique here, because the distribution of mail in rural areas is so important.

12.00 noon

I have fought for the retention of post offices, as have all Members in the Chamber. The suggested changes will not be beneficial, and they will not pass me by without note.

The Communication Workers Union, of which Royal Mail workers are members, supports the recommendation

in a recent report that Government should, and must, take responsibility for the pension deficit that was created by an extended 13-year-plus holiday from paying contributions. The CWU has written to the Prime Minister to express its views and concerns on that issue, and it has sought the support of all local councils. Indeed, I declare an interest as a member of Ards Borough Council, where a motion of support was recently tabled and supported. Such support is important.

The CWU has also noted that Royal Mail lost millions of pounds in business when Whitehall began to use private courier services. If Government were to return to Royal Mail, which I suggest they should, Royal Mail would not lose that money. There may be a lesson in that for Government.

In conclusion, I fully support the Communication Workers Union and ask the Assembly to do the same. We must send out the message that services, and the needs of our constituents, come first.

We do not need foreign investors. Instead, we need a Government that are prepared to back Royal Mail, return the work that they took from it and right the wrongs that they have recently committed. That is what the people want, and that is what is best for the people. I support the motion.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I also support the motion. I commend the Communication Workers Union and the many others who have supported the 'Keep the Post Public' campaign. Furthermore, as my colleague Cathal Boylan did, I pay tribute to all the Royal Mail workers, who provide an excellent service. Moreover, I thank those Members who tabled the motion.

As Members will be aware, there has been considerable opposition to the British Government's attempts to sell off 30% of Royal Mail to the private sector. Even from within the British Government's own ranks, opposition is growing, with more than 140 Labour MPs not convinced that the privatisation plan is acceptable. I think that all Members agree that reform and modernisation of Royal Mail is essential, and I am confident that most, if not all, Members agree that that can be achieved more effectively by the public sector.

The Communications Workers Union, which represents more than 180,000 postal workers, has offered to work with the Government to ensure that alternative methods of modernisation are investigated. The CWU, like everyone else, agrees that modernisation is required if Royal Mail is to survive in an increasingly competitive and changing market.

The British Government have portrayed Royal Mail as a failed business that will cease to exist if it does not part-privatise. However, to date, they have failed to explain with any clarity how their proposals will

address that. The truth is that Royal Mail recently announced profits of £320 million and, for the first time in 20 years, all four arms of the business have turned a profit.

It is difficult to understand the logic of privatisation, given the current circumstances. We have witnessed the instability of the private sector in recent months, and it does not inspire confidence. We have also seen huge financial bail-outs of banks and private companies, which have been questionable to say the least, yet the British Government refuse to consider the idea of investing in Royal Mail.

Royal Mail requires Government investment, as it has done for some time, to help it to adapt to a changing market. Although it is true that the Internet and mobile phones have changed the way in which people communicate, and that fewer people use the postal service to communicate, it is also true that more and more people are shopping online and that those products must be delivered. Royal Mail needs the resources to compete for the delivery of those products.

Over the past few weeks, we have seen clear evidence of the value of the public-sector postal service, with more than 27 million leaflets being delivered to advise the public about swine flu. Would any private company have been able to complete that task? If so, what would the cost have been?

Some ask what all the fuss is about, with Royal Mail's selling off only 30% of the company to raise much-needed funds for the loss-making post office sector and to guarantee its £25 billion pension fund. That may be the case, but I warn the House that new legislation will be introduced in the House of Commons in the next mandate, because the Tories are biting at the bit to privatise Royal Mail, and we must guard against that prospect. The Conservatives to my left have lambasted Labour — with some merit, I must say — but, given the opportunity, what would the Tories do to front line postal services?

Mr Elliott: Which policy does the Member advocate? He does not appear to follow the Labour Party's policy or the Conservative Party's policy. What is his policy? I have not heard it.

Mr W Clarke: I am a member of Sinn Féin; I am not a member of the Labour Party or the Conservative Party.

The crux of the argument for privatisation is grounded in the premise that only the private sector has the expertise to modernise the Royal Mail. TNT and Deutsche Post are two of the companies that have been mentioned as potential buyers. In the last quarter of 2008, TNT's profits fell by 30%, and Deutsche Post recorded a loss of €3 billion. In the same quarter, Royal Mail's profits increased.

Some scorn Royal Mail as being less efficient than other providers, and other Members mentioned that argument. That, of course, depends on how one measures efficiencies. TNT delivers a first-class, 100 g letter at nearly three times the price that Royal Mail charges. Deutsche Post delivers a first-class letter at more than three times the price that Royal Mail charges. If 30% of Royal Mail is sold off, consumers should beware. Keeping Royal Mail in the public sector makes sense.

Sinn Féin believes that Government mismanagement has led to the current financial difficulties in Royal Mail and that the Government have a responsibility to address the problems that they helped to create. Those difficulties cannot be overcome by part-privatisation, and the case for part-privatisation has not been established. Sinn Féin is opposed in principle to privatisation, and we see the part-privatisation of Royal Mail as the beginning of the process towards full privatisation. I warn again —

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

Mr W Clarke: I warn again, that if the Tories get the opportunity, they will fully privatise Royal Mail.

Mr Speaker: I apologise; in fact, the Member has an extra minute.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Be aware that, when the Tories get their opportunity — and their chances are looking pretty good, unless the Liberal Democrats can do something about it — they will introduce new legislation to the House of Commons to privatise Royal Mail.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr G Robinson: I fully support the motion. Every constituency in Northern Ireland would be negatively impacted upon if the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform's proposals were to be accepted. The proposals are totally unacceptable, and they deserve opposition.

In recent months, Northern Ireland has suffered the loss of rural and community post offices. The proposals could result in many more post offices closing on the basis of a decision made by people who have no knowledge or understanding of the requirements of the Northern Ireland people, who will suffer as a result of those decisions. A recent ICM poll showed that, of those polled, 60% of people accepted the need for reform but believed that the Post Office must remain in the public sector, and 75% opposed a sell-off to a foreign investor.

Such a sell-off would amount to semi-privatisation, and that is exactly what the proposals from the Secretary

of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform amount to. That is not the way to guarantee the investment that is required to modernise the Royal Mail and to keep it competitive. Indeed, many believe that it is the user who will end up paying for any reform, with increases in the price of postage and so on. When any form of privatisation occurs, there is a tendency to make the customer pay to ensure that dividends are at an adequate level to satisfy investors.

For the first time in many years, all parts of Royal Mail have made a profit. Indeed, its profits doubled last year. If that progress can be made in the public sector, I see no need to sell off a 30% share in the business to the private sector. The current management team appears well able to facilitate reform. As the saying goes: if it ain't broke, don't fix it. My concern is that the proposed joint venture would be only the beginning of a cherry-picking exercise that would result in the very profitable divisions of Royal Mail being sold off.

Mr Shannon: Does the Member agree that the House is sending a clear message that privatisation, in any shape or form, is not acceptable?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute

Mr G Robinson: I agree fully with my colleague.

How will the proposals benefit the people in every house and on every street who have mail delivered by Royal Mail? They will not. Indeed, the vulnerable will suffer most. I believe firmly that disabled people, the elderly and those who choose a rural life will find that more of their local post offices are closed and that a vital lifeline is lost for ever, all in the name of so-called reform.

I urge Members to support the motion; to protect Royal Mail as a profitable business in its entirety; to recognise successful reform that has been made already; and to send a loud, clear message to the Westminster Government that the Assembly does not and will not support their proposals, which will do nothing to enhance Northern Ireland's Royal Mail service. I fully support the motion.

Mrs M Bradley: By its very nature, the postal service is a universal franchise that operates throughout the world as a public service. During the most difficult times, in war and peace, the postal service has served people well, whether in the largest cities or the most socially disadvantaged areas. Indeed, letters and parcels are delivered in sparsely populated rural areas.

In the private sector, mail-distribution companies have come and gone; they have been involved in mergers, takeovers, liquidation and bankruptcies. The universal postal service is important to everyone and has been debated in the Assembly on previous occasions. When a postal service is fractured through

political realignments and a host of other upheavals, Members know what the outcome will be for its services. For that reason, the Assembly must protect those services, which operate globally. The best way to do that is to resist the hijacking of any part of Royal Mail's service through dodgy deals; many of which may give temporary financial respite in the short term, but which, in the long term, will leave a dysfunctional and fractured postal service in a changing world of electronic communication.

It may appear that Royal Mail is not as important as it used to be: nothing could be further from the truth. In areas such as Foyle, where I live, everybody knows and appreciates their local postmen and postwomen; people wait on their call every day. Those postmen and postwomen worked through thick and thin; during the Troubles, they put up with hijacking and other abuses, and the Assembly is right to support them today. Older people in particular, in rural and urban areas, depend on the postal service for letters about hospital appointments, benefits, and so on. The Royal Mail is part of a critical communication infrastructure that is local, national and international.

It does not matter to me what the service's name is: the "Royal" bit does not worry me too much, although I know that it worries some. It could be called An Post, or anything else, but it must remain global. It does not matter who runs it as long as it is not influenced by the private sector, which has destroyed banks and other institutions. I support the motion.

Mr McQuillan: I declare an interest as a Royal Mail employee who is on a career break.

I thank Members who took part in the debate. One has only to look at the cull of rural post offices that took place in 2008. If the Government push ahead with the privatisation of Royal Mail, it would have a huge effect on rural deliveries. It would not be viable for a private company's vehicle to drive up a lane that is at least a mile long just to deliver one letter a day; that simply would not happen. Privatisation would seriously affect services that rural dwellers receive, perhaps even more than it would affect urban dwellers. However, it would affect everyone.

I realise that the matter is not devolved. However, the Assembly must put down its marker and support the Communication Workers Union's campaign to 'Keep the Post Public'. It must support all the postmen and postwomen who deliver mail daily in rain, hail and snow, with little gratitude from senior management.

In proposing the motion, Lord Browne said that he supports the CWU's campaign and that it is important that the Assembly make known its opinion on the matter. He went on to say that it is essential that the Royal Mail modernise and work with the CWU. He said

that great progress had already been made in Royal Mail: during the past eight months, it made a profit.

He said that Royal Mail is unique because it delivers to every address in the UK and Northern Ireland at the same cost. TNT delivers only two days each week at double the cost of Royal Mail. Lord Browne also said that the French Government are putting on hold their plans to privatise their postal service and that Denmark is taking back a section of its postal service that had been privatised. He also said that privatisation of the postal service would affect vulnerable people most.

Moreover, he said that Lord Mandelson said in the House of Commons during the Second Reading of the Postal Services Bill [HL] that he could not agree more with the CWU's desire to keep the post public. He said that the postal watchdog needs to show how it is meeting the targets, and he agreed that Royal Mail should remain 100% in public ownership.

12.15 pm

Cathal Boylan, who is also on a career break, supported the motion and paid tribute to the people who deliver mail, especially in Armagh. He said that the Bill had three main aims and said that the pension diversity is a huge burden on Royal Mail. He rejected the privatisation of Royal Mail, which he said would lead to job losses, which, in turn, would affect front line services.

Mr Boylan: I worked in the postal service, and the perception is that privatisation will destroy front line services, such as over-the-counter services and door-to-door deliveries, and that people will lose jobs. Does the Member agree?

Mr McQuillan: I could not agree more. Privatisation would certainly damage front line services, and deliveries would be reduced from six days a week to one or two days a week, especially in rural areas. It was said that Royal Mail had doubled its profits in the past financial year and that the postal service needed modernisation because of the lack of investment over the years. I could not agree more.

Tom Elliott said that the Communication Workers Union wanted to achieve a balance and that public services could be used by a larger number of people. He said that elderly people use Royal Mail most and cannot use the Internet. Moreover, he said that the rural community would receive a service only once or twice a week and would have to collect their mail at the post office. He also said that Royal Mail was underfunded, but said he was open to change. He warned that there were no magic solutions and that the ethos of Royal Mail must be maintained. I agree with that.

Alex Attwood reckons that Gordon Brown is on his way out. He said that the British Government are in huge debt and that the postal service needs investment.

The flaw in the legislation is that one third of Royal Mail has to be sold in order to fund the privatisation of the rest of it. Mr Attwood said that that would jeopardise deliveries being made six days a week. He remarked that Postcomm needed to intervene and said that, although he will give Postcomm a fair wind, he would not rely on an outcome, given what happened to postal services last year. That is true.

David Ford said that the Royal Mail Group has experienced financial difficulties in the past few years and said that election material has been delivered bearing a competitor's stamp.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way during his winding-up speech. He mentioned Mr Ford's remark that election literature had been delivered with a competitor's stamp on it. Does the Member accept that Royal Mail delivered the leaflets and the stamp was from a company that was used to sort the mail in order to save Royal Mail costs?

Mr McQuillan: I cannot comment on the process, but if another company used it first, they must have creamed off all the profits before Royal Mail received the leaflets. That is my view, but I cannot comment on the matter whatsoever.

Mr Ford said that the Post Office's universal service is the key factor and that it must keep its focus on public ethos.

Jim Shannon said that Peter Mandelson's idea to sell 30% of Royal Mail was a concern and that the timescale was not in the public's favour. He said that 65% of voters oppose plans to sell Royal Mail and that it should be a lesson to us all. That figure rose to 89% when a foreign investor was mentioned. Furthermore, he said that a notice of motion to support the CWU's plan to keep the post public received support from all members of Ards Borough Council.

Willie Clarke supported the motion and paid tribute to the workers in Royal Mail. He said that the CWU represented 100,000 postal workers, outlined that the CWU had offered to work with the Government and mentioned the £320 million profit that was recently announced by Royal Mail. He said that the Tory Party will privatise Royal Mail and, therefore, there is little difference between it and the Labour Party.

George Robinson said that the privatisation would have a negative impact on Northern Ireland, especially because of the geographical area. He also said that a poll showed that 75% of the public was against the sell-off to a foreign investor, and that the result would inevitably be that the user paid more as the cost of any investment would come from the user's pocket. He was totally against that, and went on to say that, if it is not broke, do not fix it.

Jim Shannon made an intervention to say that the clear message coming from the Assembly was that we are against privatisation in any shape, form or fashion. That message must be clearly expressed in the Chamber today.

Mrs Bradley said that the postal service was very important; that it delivered through all kinds of troubles, wars, etc, and that its universal service must be protected and should not be hijacked by any dodgy deals. She also said that some people were unhappy with the word “Royal” in the title. However, thankfully, that was not expressed today, and everyone supported Royal Mail, no matter what its name.

The clear message from the Chamber must be that we are against the sell-off of Royal Mail, and that we support the CWU in its call to ‘Keep the Post Public’.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the proposals by the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform who plans a “joint venture” between a foreign private operator and Royal Mail; objects to this proposal as it would not guarantee the necessary investment into the UK postal industry; and supports the Communication Workers Union campaign to ‘Keep the Post Public’.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.21 pm.

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

2.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BUSINESS

Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority

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 McKay: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Do we have a quorum?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The standard procedure is to allow debates to continue until someone points out that there is not a quorum. We must wait until we get one.

Notice taken that 10 Members were not present.

House counted, and there being fewer than 10 Members present, the Deputy Speaker ordered the Division Bells to be rung.

Upon 10 Members being present —

Mr Deputy Speaker: We now have a quorum, so we can proceed.

Mr McKay: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to review the powers available to the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA); and asks if the RQIA is using these powers effectively.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) regulates children’s homes, nursing homes and residential homes, which accommodate more than 15,000 people. The RQIA has an important role, so it is crucial that it has the powers that it needs to regulate the sector and the ability to use those powers effectively.

Everybody has the right to be treated fairly and equally and with dignity and respect. Indeed, there is an onus on political representatives to uphold those rights. I have corresponded with the RQIA, and I welcome its incoming chief executive’s commitment to making the protection of the most vulnerable in our society a priority for the organisation. However, not enough is being done to protect elderly people and vulnerable adults who live in nursing homes. That is extremely alarming, given that many of those people cannot speak out themselves. We have a duty to protect not only those people but those in other care homes

that provide a quality service and are being tarnished unfairly by the bad practices of a small number of care homes that, to date, have got away with actions that are both criminal and inhumane.

Last year, it was revealed that warnings had been issued to many care homes that failed healthcare inspections. Poor care standards and the administration of medicines were among the problems that were identified. There were problems with record keeping and with notification of illness or death of residents. The RQIA exposed the poor state of some nursing homes.

Care guidelines, in themselves, are absolutely worthless if effective enforcement of these regulations is not carried out. Sanctions handed down by the RQIA need to reflect the magnitude of the regulation breaches. The question that I want to ask of the Health Minister, who has not bothered to turn up, is whether he is satisfied —

Mr Kennedy: He is not the only one.

Mr McKay: Calm down, Danny.

I want to ask the Health Minister whether he is satisfied that no prosecutions have taken place in relation to serious breaches and failures in care.

I have been dealing with one case where a daughter complained about the care that her mother was receiving in a nursing home. Her mother was not being washed regularly, was not receiving her prescribed medication and was not receiving the therapy that had been recommended by her medical team. The complaint was reviewed by the nursing home. Unsurprisingly, it found no fault in itself. That complaint was then forwarded to the RQIA, which investigated it by looking at the original report that was drawn up by the nursing home, among other things. Surely, that practice is flawed.

That took place over a two-year period. In the meantime, that lady's mother was still receiving totally inadequate care in the nursing home. Eventually, it got so bad that she moved her mother out of the home. For that family, there was no means of making a complaint and having either the RQIA or the PSNI make an emergency intervention, as is the case for children and even animals in our society.

My office and, I am sure, others have been inundated with cases of residents in homes receiving substandard care; it seems to be widespread. Families are concerned that their relatives are not getting assistance with feeding; are being given foods that they do not like; are being left soiled for long periods of time; are not being washed regularly; are not being dressed in their own clothes or are being dressed in mismatched clothes; and are not having fresh supplies of drinking water.

Mr Kennedy: Does the Member accept that there is a danger of overemphasising what are hopefully isolated cases and that the vast majority of homes —

residential and nursing — provide excellent care to a very high standard?

Mr McKay: I agree that the majority of homes provide an excellent service, but, if the RQIA does not come down hard on those who are abusing their role and neglecting the elderly, that practice will continue to become more widespread. That is why the motion has been tabled.

The list of complaints over care goes on, and it seems to be allowed to happen without reproach or fear of prosecution. The RQIA has issued warnings to residential homes that have been guilty of neglect, but that is far from good enough. We want to see the authority use its powers to prosecute in order to deter further crimes of neglect.

We need to see clear legislation — something that is missing, according to some solicitors — that protects the elderly and vulnerable adults, because at this moment in time animals have more rights in this regard than elderly people. When animals are neglected, it is an emergency, and agencies immediately intervene. When vulnerable people are neglected, there is no emergency intervention. In many cases, the abuse continues, and the RQIA gives the offending party a warning — a ticking-off. There is something seriously wrong with that state of affairs.

The RQIA is tasked with ensuring that the highest standards of care and well-being are provided to some of the most vulnerable people in our society, who reside in care and nursing homes. There does not appear to be any emergency protection for the elderly and vulnerable adults where neglect or abuse has been alleged. It is simply not acceptable that, in this day and age, the elderly can potentially be abused or neglected without adequate legislation, policies and procedures in place to protect them.

Although these failures have been detected by the RQIA and the homes involved told of their failings — that is to be welcomed — the sanctions handed down by the authority fail to reflect the magnitude of the failure of those homes to care for the vulnerable. That is also the opinion of the families of those affected.

No individual or home has been prosecuted in spite of a provision in legislation for such action to be taken. That is unacceptable. The Minister must liaise with the relevant bodies and Departments and legislate to ensure that those bodies can intervene in extreme cases of neglect immediately. People must be prosecuted for the neglect and therefore abuse of those who are in residential and nursing homes.

Mr Easton: I begin by paying due regard to the many health and social care workers in North Down constituency who daily provide health and social care of the highest quality. Many of them are working

beyond the call of duty, and their professionalism and dedication is worthy of note.

In calling for a review of the powers of the RQIA, we are seeking clarification on two issues. First, we want assurance that the powers that the RQIA requires in order to perform for all of us are adequate and effective. Secondly, if the powers are adequate, we want to know whether they are being utilised to their best effect. Ninety-five in every 100 of our constituents will be in contact with health and social care services, and they rightly expect the highest available standards from those critical services.

Regulation and quality improvement is the correct way to ensure that standards are upheld. However, we must have a regulation and quality improvement system that is fit for purpose. Announced and unannounced inspections are one part of the structure of ensuring that standards are upheld, but there are other examples of where national standards and good practice are identified, upheld and widely disseminated. In that regard, I acknowledge the invaluable work of the Social Care Institute for Excellence and the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence.

Health and social care requires independent inspection and assessment, and health and personal social services organisations must also be held to account for the services that they provide. The public rightly expect to see a regulated workforce that is committed to professional development and lifelong learning in a process of continuous development. That will reassure the people who rely on those services that they are receiving the best care available.

Effective governance procedures in the management of health and social care are necessary and need to be measured effectively and improved where necessary. There is a direct correlation between well-set, realistic standards and improvements in services and practices for patients and clients. The public are concerned about the cleanliness of our hospitals, and hospital-acquired infections trouble all of our minds. Care homes for older people must provide the standard of care that our elderly population deserve.

It is impossible to address all the areas that are critical to the motion, which range from microbiology to infection control. We recently witnessed the horrific case of Baby P, and the public rightly expect us to have proper and effective child protection procedures in place. Therefore, the RQIA is critical for two reasons: to inspect and regulate the specified services covered by health and personal social services and the independent sector and to inspect and review health and personal social services in Northern Ireland.

I do not have time to dwell on areas in which health and social care services have left patients and clients wanting: suffice it to say that uncomfortable realities

must be dealt with. The RQIA has issued warnings to 13 care homes, and inadequacies in 18 homes across Northern Ireland have been exposed. There has been poor care provision in three children's homes in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the case for effective regulation and quality improvement is unassailable. The questions that need to be asked are: is the RQIA effective, and does it have the powers to be effective?

The time is right to conduct a review, which can only assist in the process of improvement. Many are asking whether the subsequent measures are adequate to address the identified needs in cases where failures in service provision have been identified. That issue lies at the heart of the motion, and the Minister can ill afford to ignore it. He is rightly being tasked with checking the powers available to RQIA and assessing whether they are effective.

If the powers of the RQIA are critical to delivering its identified function, they must be monitored and evaluated. For the sake of the 95% of the population who will be in contact with health and social care services over the next 12 months, failure on the Minister's part to take up the motion is simply not an option. I support the motion.

2.15 pm

Mr McCallister: The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority was set up to fulfil a Programme for Government commitment made by the first Executive. The authority is there to improve public services in Northern Ireland. It has powers to regulate in various fields, and it can take action against registered homes for offences under the Order.

When Sinn Féin placed the motion in the list of no-day-named motions, it produced a press release in which Mr McKay, the Member for North Antrim, said:

"I have serious concerns about how the RQIA uses the limited powers available to them."

He went on:

"There doesn't appear to be any emergency protection for the elderly and the vulnerable adults where neglect or abuse has been alleged".

In conclusion, he spoke of a:

"lack of emergency legislation to protect the most vulnerable in our society."

All that is well and good, and Mr McKay, to be fair to him, raises an important issue. The services that the RQIA regulates are highly sensitive and require a larger-than-usual degree of oversight.

Ms S Ramsey: I hope that the Member is commending my colleagues for tabling the motion. It is a very sensitive issue.

Mr Kennedy: You have not heard it all yet.

Ms S Ramsey: That is why I asked the Member to give way now. Does the Member agree that it would be important for the Health Minister to take part in the debate, because, for want of a better phrase, we should be getting from the horse's mouth exactly what the Minister is doing as chief executive of the Department of Health?

Mr Kennedy: Have you heard of swine flu?

Mr McCallister: I am sure that you heard the answer from my colleague; that has been the issue. It has been somewhat surprising that so many health motions have been debated when we have a major and serious problem with swine flu. However, returning to the point about whether I was commending your colleagues, I will let you draw your own conclusions shortly.

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. Whatever about getting it from the horse's mouth, comments must come through the Chair.

Mr Elliott: Does the Member agree that there seems to be confusion about the suggestions in the motion? On the one hand, the Member moving the motion seems to say that the RQIA is not effective and does not have enough powers, and on the other hand he says that it is not using its powers effectively enough. Which does the Member believe is the real crux of the matter?

Mr McCallister: It is difficult to know from the proposer's opening remarks which he believes, and there seems to be a degree of confusion.

What is odd about this matter is the fact that any powers that the RQIA has were given by the Minister of Health in the first Executive, Ms de Brún. It would not be a huge shock to anyone that I think that Ms de Brún was not a good Health Minister. However, to find out that her colleagues now think that she was not a good Health Minister is a great shock. It is an even greater shock to consider that we are debating a Sinn Féin motion that implicitly criticises the former Sinn Féin Minister and to do so two days before that former Minister is asking for a vote. That seems rather strange. I do not know whether Mr McKay believes that she is doing as bad a job in Europe as she did at the Department of Health. Of course, at least he has a choice: he could join us and vote for change.

Dr Deeny: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thought that this debate was about the RQIA — is it about party-political point scoring two days before an election? We are talking about a very important authority; perhaps we should stick to the subject of the debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, but it is good advice.

Mr McCallister: I am happier to take that advice from the Deputy Speaker than from someone who

would like to be the Deputy Speaker. However, I agree with Dr Deeny's point that it is a serious subject.

The RQIA does sterling work in monitoring the quality of service provision across Northern Ireland, independent of the Health Service and other service providers. The RQIA has a key regulatory function for children's homes, residential homes and nursing homes, which are three areas in which the state has a massive duty of care for the most vulnerable citizens. The Minister has given the RQIA responsibility for making unannounced inspections of acute and non-acute services across Northern Ireland as part of the battle against *clostridium difficile*. That is an example of using the body to good effect, and, indeed, the 2001 Executive intended the RQIA to have that responsibility.

The RQIA is evidence of devolution working. It was set up by the first Executive, and the Minister is making it work better than it did under direct rule. He has identified further ways in which it can improve healthcare, and the RQIA is working to make that happen. We were all impressed by the RQIA's work during the outbreak of *clostridium difficile* in the Northern Trust, when it reported back very quickly before the Minister moved to set up a public inquiry.

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

Mr McCallister: I accept that the RQIA does exceptional work.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member for coming back to the subject. I am sure that other Members will follow his good example.

Mrs Hanna: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate, but I am confused by the call for a review of the powers of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority. Perhaps Sinn Féin Members will let me know if they have evidence that the RQIA is not accountable, because it would be very serious if that were the case. Indeed, it would be helpful if the mover of the motion of the motion would specify what legislation is required, as the RQIA already has empowering legislation.

The RQIA deals with various high-profile matters. It is responsible for monitoring and inspecting health and social care services, such as residential homes, nursing homes and children's homes. Members will also recall its independent review of the outbreak of *clostridium difficile*. The RQIA has a challenging and important role. As Mr McKay pointed out, it is up to us as elected representatives to ensure that the RQIA is aware of our concerns and that it responds to them. I am interested to hear how the RQIA responded to the complaints, and it would be helpful if that emerged in later contributions.

The RQIA exists to ensure that patients have access to health and social services. It attempts to ensure that

there are good managements and that the relevant legislation's health and safety standards are met. People demand and expect openness, accountability and safety and expect patient and resident welfare standards to be met at all times. The RQIA is the independent watchdog, and it has been tasked with a duty of care to ensure that welfare standards are met under the Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003. That Order places a statutory duty of quality on health and social care organisations and requires the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to develop standards against which the quality of services can be measured.

The RQIA has wide-ranging powers; it regulates and inspects a huge number of health and social care services, including 55 children's homes, 251 nursing homes and 241 residential homes. Its powers are similar to those of the equivalent body in the UK, but they appear to be more extensive in Northern Ireland. The remit of the RQIA is expanding in the context of changes to health and social care services. In April 2009, the functions of the Mental Health Commission were transferred to the RQIA, and I have been led to believe that a great deal of focus will be put on child and adolescent mental health services. There will also be a broader look at the issue of children being inappropriately placed in adult wards. The RQIA works under legislation that helps to support and drive improvement rather than enforcement. However, enforcement happens if there is a high risk, and emergency closures have happened in extreme cases.

To ensure public confidence in those services, it is fitting that inspections are carried out. They have a continuum of enforcement, starting with recommendations, then requirements with time frames, failure to comply notices, fines or conditions of registration, cancellation of registration and closure of the institution if appropriate. Indeed, that has happened. Closing down an institution is not always the right course of action. When standards fall, it is sometimes more productive to make recommendations on care standards, management or the living environment and to provide a time frame for the mistake or downfall in the system to be corrected.

The public need to be assured that the care provided for everyone in hospital care homes, residential homes or children's homes is of a very high standard and that the homes are constantly monitored and held to account by the RQIA. It is up to us, among others, to ensure that the RQIA is made aware of our concerns and that it acts upon them.

Dr Deeny: Unlike some Members, I will stick to the point. This is a very important debate. We want to ensure that we have good practice and high standards in our Health Service, and the Regulation and Quality

Improvement Authority must be an important cog in the Health Service's future. It is essential that it be a powerful authority. That is why the debate is worth having. The Health Committee met members of the RQIA, and I know some of its members, and they are doing their best. I am sure that they are professional in their attitudes and in their work, but we must ensure that the RQIA is given the power that it requires.

Although the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority was formed in 2003, few have heard of it; therefore, it is about time that it is discussed. The authority keeps a check on the standards in our Health Service, and the public should be aware of that. That is another reason why I welcome the debate.

The RQIA promises to ensure that there is openness and clarity, which is another reason why we should have this debate. Some of the RQIA's statements are worth considering, for instance:

"The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) is the independent body responsible for monitoring and inspecting the availability and quality of health and social care services in Northern Ireland, and encouraging improvements in the quality of those services."

The word "encouraging" is not very encouraging; it is not powerful enough. It also describes itself as an independent body, but how independent is it? We know that it can hold private institutions, such as nursing homes, to account, but can it hold the trusts and the Department to account? If it wants to be open and fair, everyone in the Health Service must be accountable, and that goes right to the top. The RQIA also states:

"Our role is to ensure".

— the word "ensure" is better than "encourage" —

"that health and social care services are accessible, well managed and meet the required standards".

The word "accessible" is good. I was elected on an issue that related to patients' access to health care. We should be able to approach the RQIA about the accessibility of health services, which is interesting and worth noting. With whom does the RQIA discuss accessibility? It is not with the patients — the most important people in the Health Service — and certainly not in County Tyrone, that is for sure.

Therefore, accessibility of services is another issue. Why not encourage the public to approach the RQIA with their concerns about accessibility of services?

2.30 pm

The RQIA also states:

"We will work to ensure that there is openness, clarity and accountability in the management and delivery of all these services."

That is good for me, as a clinician, to hear, when all of us involved in healthcare are, rightly, held to account and scrutinised. We now hear of a body to which we can take our problems with management. It is about time.

Who does the RQIA talk to when it comes to gauging good practice and good management in the Health Service? Does it consult the staff, sisters or nurses? If so, I am not aware of it. There is a great deal of work that the RQIA could and should do. We have devolved government, so if we are to have a Health Service to be proud of, we must have high standards. We must have a body to which not just management but the public and health professionals can take their concerns. Many of those concerns may be about matters that jeopardise patients' health and, indeed, their lives.

I will say one thing about management. In the RQIA's words, it is responsible for good practice and high standards in Health Service management. An example of a situation in my constituency that I — indeed, everybody in Omagh — should raise with the RQIA is that, for the past 13 weeks, nurses have been taken by bus to different hospitals from Omagh. Management originally promised that that would happen for four to six weeks. For three days a week, those nurses are gone from home from 6.00 am until 9.00 pm; they do not see their families. That is a management problem, and management cannot guarantee that the issue will have been sorted out after 22 weeks.

Another cause for concern is that senior nursing staff are terrified to go to the press or to their public representatives for fear of being identified. Staff being frightened to reveal their identities is unacceptable in the Health Service.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Dr Deeny: That is why we need a good, powerful RQIA that is accountable to the public and to its elected representatives.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank everybody who spoke during the debate, but I put on record again that I am disappointed that the Minister could not attend and respond to it. I am aware that he is dealing with the very serious issue of swine flu, but if he found time to make his way to the Balmoral Show, he can attend a 90-minute debate.

Mr McCallister: The Minister's attendance at the Balmoral Show was to launch the Military and Civilian Health Partnerships Awards and to promote the hand-washing campaign, two very serious issues.

Mrs O'Neill: The Minister is very lucky to have the Member as a cheerleader.

Members referred to the RQIA's role. The RQIA is a relatively new body in health and social care structures. As Members said, it was established in 2005, with an annual budget of £7.4 million and 122 staff to carry out inspections in nursing homes, residential homes and children's care homes. Members rightly pointed

out that the RQIA has a key role to play in measuring performance in those institutions against quality standards for health and social care. The Department sets those standards, which are based on what people should expect from health and personal social services. The quality standards are also set out in legislation, so people should be in no doubt about what to expect from services that they access.

In reality, there is an unacceptable variation in the quality of services provided. Members spoke about the good work that some of the social services do, and I would not take away from that for one minute. There is also no doubt that, since the RQIA was established, improvements have been witnessed. However, more must be done.

The RQIA has a general duty to encourage improvements in the quality of services that health and personal social services, and others, commission and provide. The RQIA's role is to promote the culture of continuous improvement and best practice through inspection and through reviewing clinical and social-care governance arrangements. The RQIA has a key role to play in securing public confidence in services that are provided, often to the most vulnerable in our society: the elderly; those in care homes; children; and the sick. If members of the public do not feel confident in the role that the watchdog plays, they will be less likely to contact it to highlight issues of concern.

Questions have been asked recently about the RQIA's independence, because, although it is a public body, the Department funds it. Some people feel that that means that the Department investigates itself through the RQIA. I have no doubt that the RQIA believes in its independence. However, more information is needed before we can feel confident that that is the case.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. Can she enlighten the Assembly as to any proof that she has that the RQIA has ignored or walked away from any breaches that it has been informed of, rather than sorting them out?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for that. There are obviously issues that we need to discuss, and I will get into those further during my contribution. There is a public perception that not enough action is being taken, and that it is not being taken quickly enough. It seems to be a long, drawn-out process.

The RQIA does not regulate or impose sanctions on statutory bodies such as the trusts. It can carry out reviews for the purposes of monitoring and improving the quality of health and personal social services, and it can investigate the management, provision or quality of the care. It can inspect both statutory bodies and providers of services for which the Department has responsibility in respect of the management and

provision of quality or access to, or even the availability of, particular types of services.

In addition, the RQIA can make a number of recommendations to the Department about what it sees as unacceptably poor services or quality of care. All of that sounds great in theory, but we need to establish where the process goes from there. Consider the incidence of hospital-acquired infections and the clostridium difficile inquiry: the RQIA undertook a very comprehensive inquiry, and there is no doubt that it made excellent recommendations that will be taken forward by the Minister and the trusts. However, that is an issue that was of high public interest. People in this Chamber monitored that situation very carefully, but what happens in a case in which, for example, a home is investigated and a number of recommendations are made to a trust? Who monitors that process and oversees how those recommendations are implemented? The role of the RQIA stops at the investigation. It produces a report, but where does the process go from there? That is something that we need to consider.

Proposing the motion, Daithí McKay talked about enforcement being key. There is no point in having standards and care guidelines if the regulations are not effectively enforced. Daithí also referred to the fact that the sanctions that seem to be handed down by RQIA do not reflect the magnitude of the regulation breaches. Despite some very serious failures being identified, not one case has been taken to court. There are probably varying reasons for that, but we need to get to the bottom of why that is so.

I noticed in the information pack that was provided for today's debate a question that was tabled by my colleague John O'Dowd about the number of failure-to-comply notices that were handed out by RQIA. It issued 93 failure-to-comply notices to 21 establishments over a particular period, which means that it has had to issue those notices on a frequent basis. They are obviously not being followed up the first time that they are issued. That needs to be looked at, because some of those organisations completely ignore those failure-to-comply notices. RQIA needs to send out a clear message that it will not accept that type of behaviour from those organisations and that it is serious about protecting people who need to use the services.

I now turn to some of the comments that were made by Members. Alex Easton talked about the good work of the health and social care workers across the board, with which I fully agree. He said that powers need to be adequate and used effectively, and that the services need to be fit for purpose. He also said that it is time to conduct a review.

John McCallister, who has left the Chamber, talked about how the services —

Mr McCallister: I am here.

Mrs O'Neill: He has changed parties.

Mr S Wilson: He has come to the right side.

[Laughter.]

Mrs O'Neill: He talked about how the services that the RQIA regulates are highly sensitive. He then went off on a rant and referred to Bairbre de Brún's time in office. She was an excellent Health Minister. She took forward a very radical policy in Investing for Health, which is still being rolled out to this day.

Carmel Hanna questioned the need to change the legislation, and I hope that it is now a wee bit clearer why Sinn Féin is saying that it must be looked at. The Department and the RQIA have an agreement to review, every four years the powers that are available to the RQIA. However, Sinn Féin is suggesting that those powers should be continually monitored. That request is not a criticism of the RQIA; rather, having the Department review the RQIA's remit to see whether anything else can be done to assist it.

Mrs Hanna mentioned that the RQIA has taken on new roles following the transfer of responsibility for the Mental Health Commission, and I welcome that fact. However, she also spoke about the lack of public confidence in the RQIA, which is what we are trying to get to the bottom of today.

Kieran Deeny welcomed the debate, and he pointed out that the RQIA is a powerful authority that must be more accessible. There is a general lack of knowledge about what it is and does, and I raised that point with it only last week. People do not know what the RQIA is, what it does, or even how to get in touch with it.

Sinn Féin wants the public to be confident about the services that they will need to avail themselves of at some stage in their lives. If vulnerable adults and children are to receive the highest standards of care at their time of need, that care and those services must be monitored and measured. We urge the Minister to keep this matter under review and to meet the RQIA to take it forward. I ask Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to review the powers available to the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA); and asks if the RQIA is using these powers effectively.

2.45 pm

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker.*]

ADJOURNMENT

Gold-Mining at Cavanacaw, Omagh

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who are called to speak will have approximately 8 minutes.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuil mé buíoch den Aire as a bheith i láthair don díospóireacht seo..

I am grateful to the Minister of the Environment, Sammy Wilson, for his attendance. My most recent visit —

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): I hope the Member appreciates, first, that I have deserted canvassers in East Antrim, and secondly, that I have had to come out of the sunshine in order to listen to him talk about gold-mining in his constituency. Nevertheless, I am looking forward to hearing his comments, although I hope that his speech proves to be interesting enough to justify drawing me away from the country lanes of East Antrim into the Assembly Chamber.

Mr McElduff: As far back as last week, when this topic first appeared on the Order Paper, I could sense resentment from the Minister. Therefore, I am grateful to him for sacrificing other distractions.

My most recent visit to Cavanacaw, outside Omagh, was last Friday afternoon. The southern Sperrins region is a beautiful part of the world, but, on arriving at the townlands in and around Cavanacaw, I was struck by the huge stockpiles of rock that scar the landscape and are visible for miles. It looked more like a quarrying business than a gold mine. Anybody passing through the area would think that that they were looking at a succession of quarrying businesses rather than a gold mine.

In 1995, planning permission was granted to Omagh Minerals Limited for the extraction of gold and silver. However, the mine did not go into production until 2007. Although planning approval was secured, numerous conditions were attached to it in order to protect local residents, community amenities and the environment. I am interested to hear the Minister's comments about how well, or poorly, those planning conditions have been monitored and enforced. Are any enforcement cases open and live?

Omagh Minerals Ltd holds a prospecting licence for 189 square kilometres in the southern Sperrins from Gillygooly to Lack, which is an area of outstanding natural beauty. Many sites have been identified for excavation well into the future and many of them are known locally by local surnames; one such is the Kerr vein site. People are fearful about the future of the landscape and tourism in the area and about the environment.

I invite the Minister to visit Cavanacaw to see the situation at first hand. Minister Sammy Wilson has met Omagh Minerals Ltd and local residents, and I am grateful for his interest in the matter. However, that interest would be enhanced greatly by a visit to the site.

As I said in my opening remarks, planning permission was secured in 1995, but it was only actualised in 2007 after one of the longest-running public inquiries ever. Local residents succeeded in securing numerous conditions to the planning permission, but they feel strongly that they have been abandoned by the Department of the Environment and its agencies, not least the Planning Service.

In a BBC news interview, Moe Lavigne, vice-president of the Glantas Gold Corporation, which owns Omagh Minerals Ltd, said:

“Galantas will not just be flogging its gold to the world market. The leftover rock can be sold on to building and construction firms as aggregate, and there's even silver and lead in the rock.”

It appears to local people that stealth quarrying has taken place and that this is more about quarrying than gold-mining. The confirmation that it contains silver and lead is yet more evidence that the rock, which should not have been moved off site, is contaminated; a fact that the Minister needs to address.

Omagh Minerals Ltd is seeking revised planning permission to allow 40 trucks in and out of the mine per day compared with one per day at present; it also asks for changes to the closure plan. If granted, that would allow the long-term stockpiling of millions of tons of aggregate, which is required for backfilling and restoration, for probable removal off site.

Many residents have come together to engage on a new course of action to ensure that any further planning applications by Omagh Minerals Ltd are refused. The grounds for refusal are based on many factors, the most important being the enforcement case, which is still open and which now covers 12 conditions in breach, with many additional conditions under scrutiny.

Other agencies are investigating the mine. There are various issues for the Health and Safety Executive regarding stockpiles and the security of the site and its entrance; Revenue and Customs is seeking the collection of the aggregate levy; the Crown Estate is reviewing the bond and restoration fund to reflect today's costs

but has refused to disclose the value of the bond to local residents; and the Environment Agency is investigating pollution and the contamination of rock removed from the gold mine.

Given the involvement of all those agencies, it is clear that much work has to be done to bring the gold mine back into line with Government policy, planning legislation, environmental standards, and the 1995 permission approval conditions. People in the area say that the situation has got out of control, and the lion's share of responsibility for ensuring that it is brought back under control rests with the Department of the Environment.

People are emphasising that the mining operations at Cavanacaw are the shape of things to come, and they are worried about the extent of the damage that prospecting licences are doing in the southern Sperrins from Gillygooley to Lack and what they will do in the future. People have described the operations as stealth quarrying rather than gold-mining, and they are worried about it.

As I said already, Minister Sammy Wilson had a meeting with representatives from Omagh Minerals Ltd in early May. The Minister was advised that the company will rely on new planning permissions and revisions to existing planning permissions to safeguard and develop operations. Multiple planning breaches concerning the current mining of Kearney vein are under investigation, but local residents have learned, to their horror, that Omagh Minerals Ltd plans to excavate a second vein for which it does not have planning permission. Once again, Omagh Minerals Ltd is showing contempt for planning regulations, and the Planning Service has questions to answer.

If Omagh Minerals Ltd intends to open new veins or to carry out gold-mining or quarrying activities in the Sperrins, they must be required to apply for the relevant planning permissions in advance of the operations, not retrospectively. In my constituency, I hear that some people who are attached to the company are boasting that they need submit only a retrospective planning application or explain away the mining as exploration work. Omagh Minerals Ltd is not worried about the planners; in fact, its workers think that, by the time that the planners dither about with enforcement cases, for instance, the company can empty any pit. That is the type of comment that is being made in Omagh and West Tyrone by people who are associated with Omagh Minerals Ltd. The residents' concerns deserve the highest possible hearing from the Department of the Environment.

There is a series of related issues, which I will not go into today. I am grateful for the attendance of MLAs from other constituencies who are interested in

the issue, and I look forward to the contributions of other Members.

Mr Elliott: I do not represent West Tyrone, but the environmental damage has the potential to move into Fermanagh. I was interested in Mr McElduff's comments. During his contribution, I do not think that he once mentioned Eskragh or the position that he played for his GAA team in Tyrone. The Adjournment debate has certainly provided a new angle.

I want the Minister of the Environment to inform the House of the protection that his Department will give to the area in which the mining operations are taking place: the landscape, the environment and the community. I do not know the exact details, but I wonder whether planning permission has been granted for all excavations. People have told me that the mining operation seems more like a quarrying operation than a gold-mining operation. I assume that there is planning permission to excavate stone material, but I do not think that that is the basis of what it is meant to be doing.

I am also curious to know what mechanisms are in place to police the determinations of the planning permission and the licences that are granted. I come from a rural farming background, and I am aware that some people in that community who commit minor discrepancies, such as dumping or tipping a few loads of soil, face the full force of the departmental authorities. Sometimes, however, the bigger operations get away unscathed and do not feel the same rigours of the law or the authorities. That is my main concern. I am concerned about the spread of the proposals and what is happening here.

I am also curious to know how many licences have been granted for such work to be carried out throughout the Sperrins.

There is deep unhappiness among the local community there, and, indeed, among the wider community. A huge concern is that such activities will spread and escalate. People believe that the authorities are not listening to them and that Omagh Minerals Ltd appears to be able to do exactly as it pleases.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Member who secured the debate for doing so. Like Mr Elliott, I represent Fermanagh and South Tyrone. The area covered by the prospecting licence of Omagh Minerals Ltd extends to Lack in County Fermanagh. As has been said, that area is beautiful and scenic and is full of natural assets that provide local people with the potential to develop tourism initiatives. One concern is that that potential is being jeopardised by the activities that are being carried out.

Furthermore, as has been said, there are concerns about planning issues. As I understand it, even though all the conditions around the planning application had not been fully determined when Omagh Minerals Ltd began work, it has been carrying out its work undeterred.

That simply adds to the general concerns about despoiling the countryside. I also understand that the Planning Service's enforcement branch has not issued an enforcement notice to the company, despite the fact that work has commenced. That is quite a serious concern, and people are also asking the Northern Ireland Environment Agency what it is doing about it. We are all aware that there has been correspondence between the developers and the Planning Service and that they have had meetings, but people want those outstanding concerns to be addressed. We hope that the Minister can go some way towards doing so this afternoon.

There is a wider concern about inconsistency in the enforcement of planning decisions. For example, I know of industries providing employment that have been served with enforcement notices because of some of their activities. In one case, a business was extending its work premises. Another example is of a farmer who built a slurry tank under the terms of a Department of Agriculture and Rural Development scheme and received an enforcement notice from the Planning Service before the cement had dried. That does not sit well against the fact that there is a lack of enforcement notices for companies that are engaged in the activities under discussion this afternoon. I agree entirely that there is great concern about the issue, and I support the comments made today.

Dr Deeny: I, too, thank the Minister for taking the time to be here and for dragging himself away from canvassing, knocking on doors and shaking sweaty hands on this warm day. I also thank him for his commitment to our area. I concur with the remarks made by two of the three Members who spoke previously. There are serious concerns that the operations under discussion today are quarrying by stealth and not, in fact, gold-mining.

I will speak about the major health concerns involved. I assure the Minister that I will not be using medical terminology, which confuses most people.

3.00 pm

Water pollution is an obvious concern. It is our most natural resource, and clean water is a precious commodity. There is a danger that the Foyle River system and the surrounding groundwater will be polluted, resulting in a negative knock-on effect for local agriculture and fishing. There is also the possibility that the polluted water might enter the food chain. Furthermore, there is concern that there is no effective containment of contaminated water. Heavy metals are toxic, and there is a fear that they may be carcinogenic.

High levels of rainfall can cause an overflow and a release of toxins, and there is also a problem of acid rock drainage. There is the suspicion that overflows

from the tailings pond ended up in the Creevan Burn during high rainfall, and that was disguised by high flooding and water discoloration.

Metals other than gold are released when rock is crushed, including lead, cadmium, nickel and arsenic, which are all potentially toxic and dangerous. Heavy metals in such unnatural concentrations can pose enormous problems because they will not break down or disappear completely. The presence of toxic metals in effluence and tailings poses a health threat.

There is also a concern for the livestock, wildlife and fish because they will also suffer from metal poisoning if their food or water is contaminated. Human health is at risk through direct and indirect consumption of contaminated products.

All the heavy metals that are released are present in dust and sediment. An open-pit operation, such as that at Cavanacaw, produces a lot of dust, especially in such a windy location. That dust is transmitted easily and poses a danger for surface vegetation, crops, livestock and humans. Pregnant women, the elderly and vulnerable people, especially those who suffer from asthma, are particularly at risk from dust and sediment, and that fact should not be dismissed.

Excavation, rock moving and crushing generate a high level of noise, and that has major ramifications for the health of homeowners in the area, along with domestic livestock and wildlife. The workforce at Cavanacaw should be aware of the increased risks to their health, and those who work in close proximity to toxic chemicals, dust, and extreme noise on a daily basis may well see a deterioration in their health and have long-term health problems — never mind accidents and, in the worst-case scenario, early death. The health of local residents must not be ignored or dismissed, because they can suffer the same negative impacts. However, they face additional problems, such as stress, worry, anxiety, loss of amenities, the devaluation of properties and negative equity. Those problems can cause mental-health issues. Increased levels of traffic must also be taken into account.

I am reliably informed that condition 28 of the planning consent document stipulated that fixed water sprays be installed on the roads to limit dust transmission, but that provision was never implemented. Condition 28 also stipulated that stockpiles of rock should be sown with a range of plants to limit the transmission of dust outside the site boundary. That was not done. Condition 23 stated that ore stockpiles should be retained in a covered area for the same reason, and that has not been done either. Those three planning breaches were confirmed by the Planning Service. No one can have any idea how much toxic dust blew across the fields in that windy location, or how much of that has entered the food chain through crops or cattle and sheep grazing.

Environmental health officer David Gillis confirmed that little or no monitoring of the site had ever taken place.

I have been informed that, depending on the Minister's response, the Committee for the Environment may look into the issue.

The Minister of the Environment: I will try to address all the points that have been raised by various Members as best as I can in the time available. Having met people on both sides of the argument and having spoken to officials from the Department, I understand the anxieties on both sides.

This issue is an example of the conflict that can occur with all economic activity, especially in rural areas where the landscape is beautiful and where there are some sensitive environmental issues. There is a conflict between jobs and the environment and between people's amenity and their employment. Let us not forget that the mine creates employment in the area and that local people depend on it for their income and livelihoods. At the same time, people who are affected by an economic activity have the right to expect some protection from it.

I listened to what Members said about the Department's role. I think that some of those comments were unfair. Mr McElduff gave us some of the history behind the mining operation. However, to ensure that all the issues that may arise from the mining activity were aired fully, debated and considered before a decision was made, the Department held an extensive public inquiry. At that inquiry, all the issues were aired, and, as a result, 40 conditions were attached to the planning application.

Since then, the site has been monitored. As a result of departmental action, some of the issues that arose have now been dealt with, and those matters have involved more than on-site considerations. For example, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has employed Queen's University to look at the off-site impact of activities at the gold mine. We do not just look at what happens on-site; we also look at the off-site impact.

I will address Dr Deeny's points in a moment. However, I will address Mr McElduff's comments first, and my remarks may be pertinent to some of the other comments that were made. A number of false assertions were made during the debate. First, activity on the site did not start in 2007. Permission to mine was given in 1995, and mining started in 1997. It is significant that for probably 10 years, there were no huge issues with the site. We must bear in mind that the issues arose first in 2007, which, I think, is the date to which Mr McElduff refers, when it was decided to remove some of the rock from the site. Prior to that, there was activity, but it did not give rise to the concerns that are being raised now.

Secondly, it has been argued that this mine is an excuse to quarry. A number of Members used the term "quarrying by stealth". However, I suppose the mine is like a quarry, given that it is an open-cast mine; that is the way in which the rock has been exposed. I spoke to the mine owners and asked them to explain the requirement for such a huge scar on the landscape, given that the vein of gold was so narrow. They referred to health and safety and to the importance of ensuring that the sides of the mine did not cave in. The mine has to be stepped and tiered, meaning that it has to be wide at the top so that the very narrow vein at the bottom can be reached.

The closure plan requires that a scar will not be left on the landscape. When the extraction is finished, the hole must be filled in. However, as we all know, when rock is extracted, broken up and replaced, there will be more rock than is needed to fill the hole. Mr McElduff said, quite rightly, that we do not want huge piles of rock scarring the landscape. That means that some of it will have to go off-site.

The issue is about how much rock is required for the closure and whether more rock was removed than was necessary. The company was wrong not to have a proper closure plan in place, because that would have indicated how much rock was required for landscaping and how much was surplus.

Some Members accused my Department of acting slowly. Within five months of the rock removal starting, my Department had stopped it. Some Members also asked why we did not serve the company with an enforcement notice. We did not do that because the company complied with the Department. It stopped its activity after being approached by enforcement officials from the divisional planning office. Therefore, an enforcement notice was not needed.

I made it quite clear to residents whom I met before the activity stopped, that if it continued, an enforcement notice would be served and acted upon. However, that was not necessary. Therefore, it is unfair for Members to say that my Department did not act, when it acted fairly quickly.

I suspect that some surplus rock will be removed from the site at some stage. That rock could be used for local road building. As Members know, I do not subscribe much to this. However, rather than increasing the carbon footprint of the construction industry by drawing rock from further afield to use in road schemes here, it makes much more sense to use the surplus rock from the local site.

I have dealt with many of the points that Mr Elliott raised on the issue of licences. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) issues the licences for further excavation or mining, not my Department. The granting of a licence does not

necessarily mean that a company will be given approval to mine. Two separate Departments are involved in that, and the kinds of factors that the Department of the Environment takes into consideration might differ from those that DETI takes into consideration when granting a licence to a company.

I have already dealt with the point that Mr Gallagher made about enforcement notices. He also asked what action NIEA is taking. As I explained, and this should answer one of Dr Deeny's points also, NIEA has a specific role. It ensures that nearby water supplies are not contaminated as a result of on-site activities. Settlement pools of water sit on the site, and it is NIEA's job to ensure that those do not leak into nearby watercourses or water sources by taking monthly samples. Twelve samples are taken every year to ensure that there is no leakage from the site.

NIEA has reported that there have been no instances of water pollution as a result of activity on the site to date. One reason for that — Dr Deeny talked about the issue of heavy metals, etc — is that although the company has permission to use a cyanide reactor to separate gold from ore, it has decided not to use that method. Therefore, the danger of that form of pollution has not arisen on site.

Dr Deeny also raised the issue of dust coming from the site. The initial public inquiry indicated that all screening, etc, had to be done in closed and wet conditions to reduce the levels of dust, and that is being done.

However, he is right in saying that no sprays have been installed in relation to materials carried on-site — and, of course, dust arises from such activity — and that stockpiles of stones were due to be planted out within two years of the operation beginning. Those conditions were not met, but I understand that sprays for the lorry loads of stone are now in place, that planting has started and that tests will take place over the growing season. I accept that those actions should have begun earlier, but as a result of enforcement action taken by the Department, those issues are being resolved.

3.15 pm

Dealing with noise emanating from the mine was part of the original planning agreement. I may be incorrect, and if so I apologise, but looking through the conditions that are still outstanding, acoustic mounding was to be provided in the form of a till bund. The Department is satisfied that the second phase of the project has yet to commence and is awaiting a survey from its construction services branch. I accept that that is another condition that should have been met at an earlier stage, but the Department is pursuing it in light of the complaints that it has received.

I listened to what Members have said today, and my Department is committed to ensuring that no one, regardless of size, scale, or type of operation, is seen to

be above the rules, regulations or planning conditions. By and large, most of the conditions laid down at the time of the original planning permission for the mine have been met. However, I am aware that some conditions of a more technical nature, and others that are more serious, have not been met. In relation to those conditions, I assure Members that no more rock will be taken from the site until a proper closure plan has been established and until the Department knows for certain what surplus rock exists. Furthermore, all the environmental issues that have been raised are being dealt with. Indeed, I understand that some of them have already been dealt with.

One other issue mentioned, which I wish to deal with, is that of the Kerr vein, and whether the mining company will begin work on that vein without planning permission. The original planning permission allowed the company to mine the vein but it decided not to do so at that time. I understand that in the interest of transparency, the company has announced on its website that it intends to mine that vein, and I wish to make clear that it is doing so on the basis of the original planning permission that was granted and not as a kind of snub-nose gesture towards local people.

Mr McElduff asked whether I will visit the site. I have sent my factor — my man who does — to look at the site and he has reported back to me. I have also studied extensive aerial photographs of the site and I have spoken to public representatives, the mining company and residents. I believe that I have a fairly good view of the site. However, should there be an occasion in the future — and of course the Assembly knows that my future is somewhat uncertain — *[Laughter.]* That being the case, the invitation may come too late, and I may not have the opportunity to go —

Mr Elliott: You had better do it quickly.

The Minister of the Environment: It may be too late if I do not do it before this weekend. If I felt that a visit to the site were necessary, I would be more than happy to go.

The Executive and my Department have an obligation to ensure that any complaints are looked at properly. We also have an obligation to judge and to balance the economic interests and the environmental and amenity interests of any planning application. I hope that my reply to the debate has demonstrated that we have sought to do that. We may not have done that to the satisfaction of some who have been severely impacted by the issue, but I hope that no one will run away with the idea that local people have been abandoned by the Planning Service, as has been suggested. That has certainly not been the case. When issues have been drawn to the attention of the Planning Service, it has sought to resolve them as quickly as possible.

Adjourned at 3.21 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 8 June 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Alex Maskey.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Although the item is not on the agenda, it would be remiss of Members if we were not to record our absolute rejection of and disgust at the attack on the home of our ministerial colleague Conor Murphy in the early hours of Thursday 4 June 2009. It is not necessary that other parties make further interventions, because I expect and appreciate that they will want to record their rejection of that disgraceful incident, during which Conor Murphy's home and the home of his retired, elderly in-laws were attacked.

Although it is self-evident, I want to make it clear that none of the people who were involved in the attack, during which slogans were painted on the property and two cars set on fire, has, at any time, approached Conor Murphy directly, face to face, like a man, to tell him his thoughts. Instead, those people chose to emerge in the dead of night.

As I say, I accept that all Members will want to record the Assembly's disgust at that attack so that its message — that Members are determined to go resolutely about their business — will be consistent, as it has been in response to other recent attacks. With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I add that the best message that can be sent to those who crept up to Conor Murphy's house in the dead of night comes from his young son, who, despite the trauma of the attack, in which a car was burned directly outside his bedroom window, considered himself fit and deemed it appropriate to get up that morning and spend the entire day at school. That demonstrates that that child is much more of a man than any of those who crept up, in the dead of night, to attack his family home.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that I speak for the entire House — all parties, from all sides — when I say that it condemns, totally and absolutely, attacks of that nature, which are wrong.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council Education Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Education that she wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in education sectoral format.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Whose responsibility is it to publish a statement on a Minister's behalf? Today's statement seems to be entirely in Irish and entirely in English. That is a departure from House protocol, and you, as Speaker, should inform the House of the exact protocol for delivering statements. The way in which the Minister has presented the statement is yet another disgraceful attempt on her part to rub the nose of the unionist community.

Mr Speaker: The procedure is clear. It is up to individual Ministers to decide how to produce and present statements to the House; it is nothing to do with the Speaker.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The statement is in English and Irish, because Irish is the native language of Ireland and English is also spoken on this island. Given our statutory duties on the Irish medium and given that I have talked to Pobal, which is an umbrella organisation, I will make the statement in the same way that Welsh or Scottish or other languages are used in other parts of Ireland and in England, Scotland and Wales.

Rinne mise ionadaíocht don Choiste Feidhmiúcháin mar Aire Oideachais, i dteannta an Aire Fostaíochta agus Foghlama, Reg Empey MLA; rinne Batt O'Keeffe TD, Aire Oideachais agus Eolaíochta, ionadaíocht do Rialtas an Deiscirt.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format, which was held in the Middletown Centre for Autism on 20 May 2009. The Executive were represented by me, as Minister of Education, and the Minister for Employment and Learning, Reg Empey MLA. The Irish Government were represented by Batt O'Keeffe TD, Minister for Education and Science. The statement has been agreed with Sir Reg Empey, and I make it on behalf of us both.

Tabharfaidh mé achoimre ar na príomhphointí a ndearnadh plé orthu ag an chruinniú, pointí a chlúdaigh na réimsí comhaontaithe ar fad maidir le comhoibriú san earnáil oideachais.

I will summarise the main points from the meeting on all the agreed areas of educational co-operation. Where educational underachievement is concerned, the North/South Ministerial Council welcomed a

presentation from education practitioners on approaches to the integration of newcomer children in schools and the challenges that they face. Ray Gilbert, head of the education and library boards' inclusion and diversity service, chaired the presentation, and also involved were Josephine McMahon from St Joseph's Convent Primary School in Newry; Geraldine McClory from St Mary's High School in Newry; Eileen Donnelly from Drumglass High School, Dungannon; Pat Halpin from Balbriggan Community College, Dublin; and Breda Naughton from the Department of Education and Science. We noted and welcomed the continued co-operation on dealing with educational underachievement across the island.

Bhreathnaigh an Chomhairle an dul chun cinn atá déanta ar réimse ceisteanna a bhaineann le tearcghnóthachtaí oideachasúil agus le hoideachas don Lucht Siúil, agus thug muid dár n-aire go dtionólfar comhdháil chomhpháirteach eile san fhómhar ar uimhearthacht a dhíreoidh ar mhúineadh agus ar fhoghlaim na matamaitice in iarbhunscoileanna. D'aithin muid go gcuirfeadh an chomhdháil sin le cur chun cinn na n-ábhar STEM: eolaíocht, teicneolaíocht, innealtóireacht agus matamaitic.

The council reviewed progress on a range of issues to do with educational underachievement and Traveller education, and it noted that a second joint conference on numeracy, which will focus on the teaching and learning of mathematics in the post-primary setting, will be held in autumn 2009. We recognise that the conference will contribute to the promotion of the science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) agenda. Furthermore, we noted that a peer-learning exercise in school attendance is scheduled to take place in the north-west in September 2009. The event will bring together a range of academics, professionals and policymakers to consider existing services, share their experiences of ongoing initiatives and examine best practice so that school attendance issues can be addressed.

Beidh seachtain leabhar do pháistí ann le linn 2010 a dhíreoidh ar ghníomhaíochtaí a ceapadh le léitheoireacht a chur chun cinn mar rud dearfach. D'aithin muid go mbeadh ról tábhachtach ag na seirbhísí leabharlainne poiblí.

A children's book week will be held during 2010 to focus on activities that are designed to promote reading as a positive experience. We recognise that the public libraries services will have an important role to play. The Council also noted that following the successful joint Traveller education conference in Newry on 11 March 2009 it is proposed to create a forum for practitioners and policymakers to highlight and share best practice.

I will move to teachers' qualifications and superannuation. The Council welcomed closer liaison

between the Department of Education and the Department of Education and Science aimed at facilitating access to preparatory courses for the Irish-language qualification requirements for teaching in schools in the South. We also noted the continuing co-operation between the respective departmental inspectorates aimed at supporting the continued development of inspection practice across the island.

Thug muid dár n-aire go bhfuiltear ag súil leis go mbeidh fáil ar an chomh-thionscadal taighde maidir leis an bhealach is fearr le ceannairí nua scoile a mhealladh agus a fhorbairt faoi dheireadh mhí Meithimh 2009. Thug muid dár n-aire fosta an obair leanúnach faoin chlár malartuithe mac léinn agus múinteoirí Thuaidh/Theas agus an ghníomhaireacht leanúnach taighde agus comhdhála ar oideachas múinteoirí faoin Bhuanchóiste ar Oideachas Múinteoirí Thuaidh/Theas.

The Council noted that the joint research project on how best to attract and develop new school leaders is expected to be available by the end of June 2009 and noted the ongoing work under the North/South student-teacher exchange programme and the teacher-education research and conference activity under the aegis of the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS).

As regards teachers' superannuation, the Council noted that measures are being planned to provide additional information on pension issues to teachers and others in the public sector who wish to transfer to work in the other jurisdiction, including information on recent changes in pension arrangements and qualifying recognised overseas pension schemes.

On the subject of special educational needs, the Council noted that there had been an exchange of correspondence between Ministers about Middletown and that the situation will be kept under active review by both Departments.

Chuir muid fáilte roimh na pleananna atá ag an Roinn Oideachais agus ag an Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta comhdháil ar neamhord i réimse an uathachais a reachtáil i gcomhpháirt lena chéile i mí na Samhna 2009.

We welcomed the plans for the Department of Education and the Department of Education and Science to jointly run a conference on autistic spectrum disorder in November 2009.

The Council discussed school, youth and teacher exchanges.

Chuir an Chomhairle fáilte roimh an dul chun cinn atá déanta go dtí seo maidir le creatlach a fhorbairt i gcomhair comhchláir do bhainistiú agus chistiú malairtí oideachais san am atá le teacht. Thug muid dár n-aire go gcuirfidh an dá Roinn tús le hobair le

comhbheartas a fhorbairt a bheidh mar bhonn agus thaca ag an chlár nua agus go gcuirfear tuarascáil ar dhul chun cinn i láthair ag cruinniú de chuid na Comhairle sa toadhcháí.

The Council welcomed the progress that has been made in developing a framework for a joint programme for the future management and funding of educational exchanges. We noted that both Departments will be working to develop a joint policy to underpin the new programme and that a progress report will be submitted to a future North/South Ministerial Council meeting. In light of the ongoing work programme, it is the intention of both Ministers that the North/South exchange consortium will continue for a year, pending review by the two Departments.

Mar fhocal scoir, shocraigh muid gur chóir an chéad chruinniú eile den Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas i bhformáid na hearnála oideachais a thionól i mí na Samhna 2009.

In closing, we agreed that the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format should take place in November 2009. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): I want to place on record our disappointment that, given the meeting's location and the context in which it took place, which was the Irish Government's announcement that they were withdrawing funding for the Middletown centre, only three lines of the Minister's statement are given over to that fact.

The Minister said:

"the Council noted that there had been an exchange of correspondence between Ministers about Middletown, and that the situation will be kept under active review".

Will the Minister tell the House what exchange of correspondence she has had with the Minister of Education and Science in the Irish Republic about Middletown? What, precisely, is the situation on the commencement of the key assessment services scheduled to start at Middletown next year, bearing in mind that the estimated annual running costs of the Middletown centre are £3.5 million in 2010-11 and that several million pounds have already been spent on it to date? Unfortunately, we have seen little progress on that issue.

12.15 pm

Secondly, I note the Minister's reference to literacy and numeracy; science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM); and the research project to develop new school leaders. When will the Committee for Education and, indeed, the House see the Northern Ireland literacy and numeracy strategy report, the STEM review report, and the review of teacher

education report, which, as seems to be the case nowadays, are long, long overdue?

Mr Speaker: I ask all Members to ensure that their mobile phones are switched to silent or, if possible, switched off altogether please.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat. I wish to record my appreciation of the wonderful work that the Middletown Centre for Autism does and will do in future. It is a very important centre doing world-class work.

The centre already provides two services: a training and advisory service for parents, teachers and other professionals, and a research and information service. The plan is that the Middletown centre will provide two further services: a two- to three-day multidisciplinary education assessment service, and a five-week residential, multidisciplinary education and learning support service. The centre will be multidisciplinary and will work in collaboration with local services. It will not replace the development of local provision; rather it will seek to enhance or support existing services. I look forward to having the support of all parties for the wonderful work that the centre does.

With regard to the Chairperson's question, I wrote to Batt O'Keeffe on 12 May to express my disappointment at the pause in the funding for the Middletown centre from the Southern Government. I told him very clearly that I could not accept any cuts in funding for this important project. That position is shared by many organisations throughout Ireland — north, south, east and west. Concern has also been expressed in Leinster House. The Minister for Education and Science has assured me that the centre will continue to be enabled to provide services and to develop additional services and that he remains committed to the centre. I welcome that. I reminded him of the origins of the project, when both Governments recognised the need for this approach to tackling the barriers faced by children with autism.

The Department of Education remains absolutely committed to the centre. We will continue to commit to the provision of funding on an equal basis with the Department of Education and Science (DES). I have instructed Department of Education officials to meet Department of Education and Science officials to explore options. Until discussions have taken place about the totality of the funding from the Department of Education and Science, the centre will continue to provide the training and advisory service and the research and information service.

The detail of the DES position on the capital programme funding is being discussed. The way forward is being considered as a matter of urgency. The chairperson of the Middletown Centre for Autism, Laurence Crowley, met Batt O'Keeffe and me, and he raised his concerns about the Southern Government's

decision on funding for that centre. A key feature of the centre is that specialist education and health professionals will work together to the benefit of children with autism throughout the island of Ireland.

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. I am not sure whether, during the lengthy list that the Chairperson of the Education Committee read out, the special educational needs (SEN) review was mentioned. What is the current status of the SEN review? Whether special educational needs are provided for at the Middletown centre, as discussed at the NSMC meeting, or locally, it is important that we have a world-class system in place.

The Minister of Education: The Member's question is timely. It is very important that everyone in the House understands the importance of the special educational needs and inclusion review.

The Department commenced the review of special educational needs and inclusion in April 2006 to address issues that are associated with the current SEN framework. Those issues included inconsistencies and delays in identification, assessment and provision; the year-on-year increase in the number of children with statements of special educational needs; and the bureaucracy that is attached to the current arrangements. Although children with special educational needs are the key focus of the review within the context of inclusion and the reality of diversity in our schools, after we listened to professionals in the field, recognition was also given to the increasing diversity of need in our schools and to the challenges that many of our teachers deal with in providing appropriate support for children and young people who face a range of barriers to learning.

Throughout the policy development phase, the review team engaged with a wide range of stakeholders, including representatives from the statutory and voluntary sectors, parents, children and young people. The review aims to ensure that every child and young person who faces a barrier to learning is given a fair and equal chance and is provided with the necessary support as early as possible so that they can be helped to achieve their full potential.

The key proposals that arise from the review will seek to provide consistency of provision across the five education and library boards as we move into ESA; early identification of barriers to learning; early and appropriate intervention; capacity building and upskilling of teachers and the wider school workforce; and collaborative working between education and health professionals.

The policy proposals were agreed in February 2008, and they received a positive hearing from the Committee for Education in May 2008. Indeed, all parties were represented at that Committee meeting. Owing to their cross-cutting nature, the policy proposals were issued

to Executive colleagues in July 2008 for agreement on their issue for public consultation, and a further memo was sent to the Executive in November 2008. I also sent an equality impact assessment (EQIA) on the proposals to the Executive to help inform their understanding.

In May 2009, another memo was sent to Executive colleagues, and that contained minor amendments to the foreword and preface to the document on the policy proposals to aid clarification for the reader. That memo also sought agreement to proceed to public consultation. On 19 May 2009, the Assembly debated a private Member's motion and an amendment to that motion on publishing the policy proposals. The amendment fell, and the motion was carried. Given that, I hope that all parties in the House heed the will of the Assembly; it is terrible that some parties are delaying the implementation of such important proposals.

It was very disappointing, despite it being 11 months since the original referral, and despite the Assembly debating and supporting a motion on 19 May that called on the Executive to agree to issue the policy proposals for public consultation, that the consultation document was not included on the agenda for the Executive meeting on 21 May. The next Executive meeting is scheduled for 11 June, and I hope sincerely that all parties see sense on the issue. In an earlier contribution, we heard concern for our children who are on the autistic spectrum; let us see action instead of crocodile tears.

Mr B McCrea: I struggle to find anything of any substance in the Minister's statement. There was a bit of a ramble about the Middletown Centre for Autism, but we know that it does not have enough money. I suppose that we have a purpose for it now; at least it is good for meetings. I see nothing in the statement about an approach to STEM subjects and getting people to study single sciences; I see only a missed opportunity.

I do not know whether I can raise the issue that I want to, because the Minister seems to be making more statements in her answers than she did in her original statement. As far as I can see — perhaps the Minister will clarify this point — there was no discussion about fee-paying schools in the South, the fact that the best exam results in the South come from those schools, and what lessons the South has learned from the abolition of selection. Discussion on those issues would be interesting.

The only substance that I could hear in the Minister's statement was when she said:

"In closing, we agreed the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format should take place in November 2009."

Why is that the only substantial point that I heard?

The Minister of Education: The Member's opposition to anything North/South is becoming more

obvious by the day. As I said, the Middletown Centre for Autism is a first-class centre of excellence that is doing tremendous work, and it is shameful that people are trying to play politics with it.

Science, technology, engineering and maths were on the agenda. I hope that the Member is not saying that that is not an important area for discussion. The Member claims to care about children who are underachieving. That subject is a major part of our discussions, and some of the best work, North/South, that we are doing is for underachieving and newcomer children across the island. The Council received a very good presentation on newcomer children and on strategies and learning about that issue on an all-island basis.

The Member will need to put his question about fee-paying schools to the Minister in the South of Ireland.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Fáiltím roimh ráiteas an Aire agus gabhaim buíochas léi as é a chur faoi bhráid an Tionóil. Caithfidh mé a rá gur maith liom an leagan amach atá ar an ráiteas, leis an dá theanga ar aon leathanach amháin. B'fhearr liom féin, áfach, go mbeadh an Ghaeilge ar thaobh na láimhe clé den leathanach; b'fhéidir go smaointeoidh an tAire ar an mholadh sin dá céad ráiteas eile.

I welcome the Minister's statement and thank her for it. Unlike Mr Storey, I am quite pleased with the way in which the statement is presented bilingually, although I prefer to see the Irish on the left-hand side of the page. Perhaps the Minister will take that proposal on board for the next statement.

The Minister said:

"the Council noted that there had been an exchange of correspondence between Ministers about Middletown".

Does she agree that her approach to the Middletown funding issue — the megaphone diplomacy in which she engaged — was not helpful and that the funding issue could, perhaps, have been resolved had she approached the problem with a little more tact?

Mr Speaker: Will the Member please come to his question?

Mr D Bradley: I have already asked it.

The Minister of Education: Ar dtús —

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: There are no points of order during statements.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an chéad pháirt den cheist sin. I will look at the Member's proposal about having Irish on the left-hand side of the page. Indeed, I look forward to all Ministers, including the Minister from Mr Bradley's party, bringing forward statements in Irish and English. However, I have no objections to having the Irish on

the left-hand side of the page. That would be a very positive move.

With regard to Middletown, I hope that the Member is not suggesting that — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: I hope that the Member is not suggesting that, if a Government in the South of Ireland withdraw funding, we should not stand up vigorously for the Middletown Centre for Autism in private and in public. I make no apology for doing so in private and in public. I wrote to Minister O'Keeffe long before we made any public statements on the matter. I am not afraid to stand up and be counted when people are withdrawing funding or claim that they will withdraw funding for special needs children.

Mrs Long: The Minister mentioned children's book week. Children who are blind or visually impaired not only cannot access literature for leisure purposes but still struggle to get books and texts in the right formats for learning. One suggestion was to create central repositories for those resources. Has the Minister had discussions in the North/South sectoral format about having those resources made available to children across the island? If not, does she intend to do so?

The Minister of Education: We have not had discussions at the North/South Ministerial Council about that issue, and I will bring the matter to our officials.

Mrs M Bradley: How many more reviews will there be of North/South educational exchanges before a proper mechanism is put in place? Will the Minister assure the House that the North/South Exchange Consortium will have a central role in the implementation of the new framework?

12.30 pm

The Minister of Education: The North/South Exchange Consortium has played an important role, and it is pleased that we continue to provide funding. The consortium continues to do important work in the run-up to the move to ESA. I will keep the Member updated on any discussions that take place as we decide how to move forward.

Mr McKay: I thank the Minister for her statement and welcome the North/South Ministerial Council's ongoing work. What cross-cutting action is the Department of Education taking to tackle educational underachievement?

The Minister of Education: Just bear with me for one moment — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. My Department is taking forward a radical programme of cross-cutting measures to tackle educational underachievement among working-class

and newcomer children. We have brought forward a range of policies that aim to tackle disadvantage and inequality, and to enable every young person to fulfil her or his potential.

The policies include transfer 2010; ‘Every School a Good School’; the revised literacy and numeracy strategy; the review of special educational needs and inclusion; the policy for newcomer children; the early-years strategy; the extended schools programme; and the review of Irish-medium education.

The Programme for Government and the associated public service agreement (PSA) targets set out the cross-cutting actions to tackle underachievement. My Department leads on PSA 10 and PSA 19, which are focused on raising standards and tackling underachievement. We also work with other Departments on the delivery of key programmes. For example, we work with the Department for Social Development in the delivery of the neighbourhood renewal targets that are set out in PSA 10, and we work with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to promote the health and well-being of young people.

Tackling underachievement, and dealing with the 12,000 young people whom our system fails every year, is top of my agenda. We cannot continue with a system that fails so many boys and girls from the Protestant and Catholic working-class communities and so many newcomer children who face disadvantage in our schools because they arrive here with a second language.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. The regular updates on North/South Ministerial Council meetings are useful. I note that Reg Empey attended the meeting and, indeed, cleared the Minister’s statement: that should answer Basil McCrea’s points.

Will the Minister allay recent concerns by giving an assurance that students from the North will not be disadvantaged in applying for university places in the Twenty-six Counties because of the timing of A-level results?

The Minister of Education: I place the utmost importance on equality of opportunity for all our young people. I want to ensure that young people can apply for courses, and transfer from post-primary to higher and further education, based on merit rather than on where they live.

I raised the matter with Batt O’Keeffe, in writing and verbally. He has given me assurances that institutions in the South will hold back a sufficient number of places to allow offers to be made to A-level applicants. I welcome his assurances that he fully appreciates that equality and the North/South dimension are paramount in the provision of higher education. I will inform every post-primary school principal of Mr O’Keeffe’s assurances in writing so

that no students are anxious about gaining university places on any part of this island.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Mr Bradley began his contribution by speaking Irish, and he finished it in English. How do we know that what he said in Irish was exactly the same as what he said in English? There is an issue as to whether we are being transparent and whether the Irish language is being misused in the House. We are not happy, because it seems that the system is being abused.

Mr Speaker: Under Standing Order 78, Members may speak in the language of their choice — *[Interruption.]*

Order. Let me finish. I get an absolutely clear translation of Members’ words, no matter which language they prefer to speak. That is all that I wish to say on that issue.

Mr Storey: Further to that point of order, having a clear translation is different from the words being said exactly as they were originally said in the first language. That is my understanding of the Standing Order, which is one of the rules that govern the House.

Mr Speaker: Standing Orders are very clear. If a Member wishes to speak in a certain language, he or she must also translate it into English. That is absolutely clear, and that is what Dominic Bradley did.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We have had some attempts in the House to try to keep supplementary questions free flowing, and a direction was given that Members should not read from prepared scripts during Question Time, but that did not seem to be the case on this occasion. I realise that Standing Orders may not cover that eventuality, but will you undertake to raise the issue with the appropriate authorities, because it takes some time to listen to pre-prepared answers?

Mr Speaker: I wish to clarify that questions to Ministers’ statements are not supplementary questions; they are questions to statements. I have often said that ministerial statements should be an opportunity for Back-Benchers to hold Ministers and the Executive to account. However, I have some sympathy with what the Member is saying. There are occasions when Ministers feel that they have to read out three- or four-page responses when they are replying to supplementary questions or questions on statements. However, I assure Members that, as Speaker, I am looking at that issue, because I do not think that it is necessary, especially when it comes to supplementary questions and ministerial statements. I am dealing with the issue through the Executive, and I assure Members that I have some sympathy with them on the issue.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2009

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

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

The Up-rating Order is an annual Order, which sets out the rates of contributory and non-contributory benefits, together with the various premiums that form part of income-related benefits. In general, the amounts are based on changes to the relevant price indicators over the 12 months ending in September. Most social security benefits are increased in the usual way in line with the increase in the retail price index in September, which was 5%. Income-related benefits, that is, income support, housing benefit and income-based jobseeker's allowance are increased by the Rossi index, which is 6.3% this year.

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

The basic state pension is, and will remain, the foundation of pensioners' incomes, and this year it rises by £4.55 a week to £95.25 for single pensioners and by £7.25 a week to £152.30 for couples. Members will recall that I increased the annual Christmas bonus from £10 to £70, which was equivalent to bringing forward the increase in state pension from April to January. Those increases are against a backdrop of falling inflation in line with the highest increase in inflation last year.

Increases in pension credit mean that no single pensioner will need to live on less than £130 a week, and couples will see an increase of £9.10 to £198.45 a week.

Those are the highest increases since pension credit was introduced in 2003. The Order will provide extra money for disabled people, carers and those of working age. It increases child-related allowances that are paid as part of income-related benefits in parallel with child tax credits. From April 2009, the allowance paid for a child who is dependent on income-related benefits is increased by almost 7%, from £52.59 to £56.11 a week.

From April 2009, incapacity benefit is increased using the same measure, which is the Rossi index, as the employment and support allowance so that, over time, all claimants in similar circumstances will receive the same level of support. The benefit rates for incapacity-benefit claimants with an age addition will not, as was suggested last summer, be frozen. Instead, their overall benefit will increase by at least half the level of the Rossi index, which equates to 3.15%, meaning that they will receive no less than £95.15 a week. That is the same amount of benefit as someone

in the support group who receives contributory employment and support allowance.

My Department has no power to set different benefit rates for Northern Ireland; it is empowered only to set the same rates as apply in Britain. The total cost of the new benefit rates for this year is approximately £155 million. All Members will wish to ensure that people in Northern Ireland, including some of the most vulnerable in society, continue to receive the new rates.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Simpson): The Committee for Social Development considered the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 at its meetings of 26 February and 19 March 2009. It is understood that the Order will increase a range of social security benefits by various rates. As the Minister outlined in her statement, the increase ranges from 5% for non-income-related benefits to 6.3%, in line with the Rossi index, for income-related benefits. The Committee welcomes the increase in benefits for some of the people in society who are most in need, and it, therefore, recommends that the Assembly affirms the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2009.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Although I welcome any increase for people on benefits, it would be remiss of me not to mention that most of the benefits, such as income support, pension credit, and so forth, are, by the Government's admission, at a subsistence level. I accept that the Order is parity legislation, but we must constantly be aware of, and address, the fact that the level of retirement pension here and in Britain is the meanest in the developed world.

Although people on benefits are receiving an increase, it is largely lost because they pay more for food and fuel, such as electricity and gas, and so forth, than claimants who live in Britain. Although the Order is parity legislation, it does not compare like with like. The Assembly should examine and address that situation urgently. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also welcome the Minister's statement. She mentioned falling inflation, but prices are still increasing in Northern Ireland, and as a Member said earlier, the costs must be met somehow. Nevertheless, I welcome the increase in benefits.

As all Members know, an enormous amount of paperwork is involved in making a claim. Will the Minister and her Department continue to work to make the process easier for all claimants?

12.45 pm

The Minister for Social Development: I am pleased with the consensus of support across the

Assembly for the Social Security Benefits Up-Rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2009. I thank Mr Simpson and the Social Development Committee for dealing with the Order positively on 26 February and 19 March, and for the manner in which he has dealt with it in the House today. I agree with Mr Simpson that the Order's purpose is to uprate income and financial assistance.

I note Mr Brady's comments on the rates of benefit. I am glad that he recognises that the Department for Social Development does not have the power to set different rates of benefit for Northern Ireland. He knows that they are set in Westminster and that people who are elected should take their seats in the House of Commons in order to deal with benefit rates and to take part in the Committee Stages of various Bills connected to welfare reform. There is a message in that for his party.

Kieran McCarthy supported the Order, but raised the issue of the simplification of benefits, which is something of which I remain mindful. I am very conscious that constituents face a daunting task in completing complicated forms. My Department and I will be happy to look at that. I was hoping to meet the former junior Minister in the Department of Work and Pensions, Tony McNulty, but because he resigned on Friday, a meeting that had been planned for next week will not take place. I hope to meet his replacement fairly shortly and I will raise that issue, as I did with Mr McNulty's predecessor, who has also now gone, James Purnell, because I believe that all claimants' access to the benefits system must be made as easy as possible.

I invite Mr McCarthy or any Member to bring me potential solutions. I will be happy to discuss them with the appropriate Ministers in Britain. We all want to ensure that the value of benefits is not eroded by inflation. Notwithstanding the economic downturn, the credit crunch and the cost of living in Northern Ireland, the up-rating Order will make sure that that does not happen.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Diabetes Service Framework

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

Mr Shannon: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the threat posed by the ever increasing rates of diabetes; notes that Northern Ireland has the highest prevalence of the disease in the UK (5.4%) and remains the only area not to have a dedicated regional strategy to address the issue; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to introduce a stand-alone diabetes service framework.

This is an important issue. Diabetes is the unknown disease and, as such, it is important that the motion is discussed in the Chamber today.

We are used to hearing statistics, but they serve to underline the importance of today's debate. Currently, 61,000 adults and 1,000 children are living with diabetes. An estimated 12,500 people have the condition but are unaware of it. Diabetes is the leading cause of blindness among people of working age, the leading cause of renal failure and the leading cause of non-trauma-related amputations.

People with diabetes are five times more likely to suffer from heart disease, three times more likely to suffer a stroke and 30% more likely to experience depression or anxiety. Premature death is a real possibility. Two out of three people who die as a result of diabetes are killed by complications that could have been avoided had they known of their condition.

The International Diabetes Federation believes that people with type 2 diabetes die five to 10 years earlier than people without diabetes. From 2005 to 2008, there was an 18% increase in the adult incidence of diabetes, and those figures are only for people who were diagnosed. Therefore, a great many more people with the condition are out there. Approximately 115 children a year are told that they have diabetes, and approximately 22% of Northern Ireland primary-school children are classed as overweight or obese. In Northern Ireland, 60% of adults have a weight problem, and as many as one in five is obese. The International Diabetes Federation believes that up to 90% of type 2 diabetes cases are attributable to weight gain. As a type 2 diabetic, I must declare an interest.

Aa' wusnae sae lang ago telt bi' mae doakter that Aa' haud twau soarts o' diabetes. It wus a shoack tae tha systim an yit Aa' hae bin abel tae git maesel intae a paetern an hae velyed tha help geen tae me bi' tha

NHS staff. Hooiniver, it is unnerstaunabel that these staff er unner a awfu lok o' pressur. In May 2007, tha DHSSPS sterted aff oan tha furst stage o' bringin aboot a servis o' framewoarks in Norlin Airlan.

In 2008, tha DHSSPS telt Diabetes UK Norlin Airlan that tha Mannyistar fer DHSSPS, Michael McGimpsey, haud maed a decision oan tha servis framewoark fer 2008 en oanwards. Aa' shoart list o' six main areas, takkin in diabetes wus pit fort tae tha DHSSPS, followed bi' an eveluatshin bi' tha depermental subgroup. Tha Mannyistar anoonced that woak shud begin oan tha develomunt o' a servis framewoak fer childers health an weel-bein, an a servis framewoak fer tha ouler fowks health an weel-bein in 2008.

I was recently diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. Although it was a shock to the system, I have managed to get myself into a routine, and I have valued the support and assistance of NHS staff. However, that staff is under immense pressure. In May 2007, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) embarked on the first phase of developing service frameworks in Northern Ireland. In May 2008, the Department informed Diabetes UK that Minister Michael McGimpsey had made a decision on the service framework programme for 2008-09 and onwards. A shortlist of six priority areas, including diabetes, was submitted to the Department, and, following evaluation by the departmental subgroup, the Minister announced that work should commence in 2008 on developing a service framework for children's health and well-being and on one for older people's health and well-being. The Department also announced that it anticipates that additional areas for service framework development will be taken forward from 2009-2010. Those areas will be drawn from the remaining priorities, including diabetes, that have been identified and evaluated by the Department.

It has been suggested that diabetes may only be included within a cardiovascular service framework. The cardiovascular service framework addresses three specific areas relating to diabetes: everyone with diabetes should have the condition diagnosed; all patients with diabetes should have access to education about their condition, as well as, I believe, emotional and psychological support; and all patients with diabetes should be offered a review of their condition at least once a year by a suitably qualified treatment team.

It was at that stage that I was contacted by Diabetes UK, which has stated that the current level of care is simply not enough. I can see why, and I hope that the Assembly will agree with me.

The treatment of diabetes consumes £1 in every £7 spent on healthcare in Northern Ireland; in 2005-06, £43.7 million was spent on diabetes. However, that

figure excludes the cost of treatment for diabetes in primary, community, personal social services or outpatient settings. It is estimated that 10% of the NHS's annual budget — approximately £350 million — goes on treating diabetes. In 2006-07, 634 people were admitted to accident and emergency departments suffering from diabetic ketoacidosis — that is a big word. Clearly, Northern Ireland needs a stand-alone diabetes service framework similar to the one that is in place throughout the UK. Therefore, our goal should be to have something similar to what is available in the UK mainland.

In 2006, the United Nations called for Governments to create national diabetes programmes to tackle the epidemic. Northern Ireland is one of the few areas in the world that is yet to implement such a strategy.

Wide inequalities exist in care for people with diabetes across Northern Ireland depending on where a person lives. That must be addressed. The evidence is conclusive: early intervention —

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Is the Member aware that we have operated a diabetes strategy in Northern Ireland since 2003? Diabetes UK played an important part in advising the Department when that strategy was put in place, and I have invested large amounts of resources in it.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his intervention. Nobody denies that Diabetes UK was involved, but we are looking for a process that is similar to that of the UK mainland, where a framework addresses the issue. Unfortunately, we do not have a similar framework in Northern Ireland, and that is the reason for today's motion.

As I said, wide inequalities exist in care for people with diabetes across Northern Ireland depending on where a person lives. There is concern that the inclusion of diabetes in the new cardiovascular service framework (CVSF) could replace the recommendations outlined in the joint CREST/Diabetes UK report of 2003, to which the Minister referred. The CVSF does not cover those standards adequately. Furthermore, it does not address issues relating to the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of diabetes; that is very worrying. That is what we are trying to address in today's motion.

Diabetes UK Northern Ireland believes that a stand-alone framework would include the three standards mentioned in the CVSF, with additional commitments and targets: everyone with diabetes should be diagnosed within a year of having the condition, with targets established for the number of cases diagnosed without complications. Currently, 50% of those diagnosed already have complications due to late diagnosis, which means that irreparable

damage has been done and that it is too late to prevent long-term cost to the individual. Moreover, diabetic complications increase NHS costs for a patient by more than five-fold.

All patients with diabetes should have access to education about their condition, as well as emotional and psychological support; access should be regular and equitable, with targets to ensure that it is received. Additionally, it should fulfil the five criteria, with tailored programmes for vulnerable groups and minimum standards on what should be covered, including podiatry. At present, a postcode lottery of care exists in relation to structured patient education; a service that is vital, as 95% of care in diabetes is self-management. There should be a commitment to tailored programmes for children, elderly people, vulnerable adults and those with gestational diabetes. A commitment to structured education is very welcome and will help to reduce complications and mortality, but we need a more stringent commitment. We seek that through the motion.

All patients with diabetes should be offered a review of their condition at least once a year by a suitably qualified treatment team, whether through a GP or a diabetic class that most surgeries and health clinics have. With the ever-increasing rates of obesity and its strong link to type 2 diabetes, an extra commitment is needed on intervention and lifestyle modification. Every one of us must look at our lifestyle and consider whether, conscious of sugar and fat intake, we replace the chocolate, biscuits and lemonade with apples. It is also important that patients receive feedback to aid self-management. The Institute of Public Health in Ireland estimated in 2007 that if obesity levels continue to rise in a linear fashion, incidence levels in Northern Ireland will increase to almost 85,000 adults with diabetes in 2015.

It could not be clearer that the escalating problem needs to have real and undivided attention and its own framework, and that is why, as a diabetic and a representative of the people of my constituency, where I am aware of the number of people who are being diagnosed as diabetic, especially those children and adults —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Shannon: I propose the motion.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion.

The proposer of the motion talked about the link between obesity and type 2 diabetes. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety is undertaking a major inquiry into obesity, which is fast becoming

the number one health problem facing society. The inquiry is looking at what is being done to prevent obesity and what weight management or other services are in place to treat those with obesity-related illnesses.

As I said, there is a clear link between obesity and type 2 diabetes, although obesity is not the sole cause of the disease.

1.00 pm

As Members know, there are two types of diabetes. Type 1 is genetic, tends to develop in younger people and has no link to weight issues. However, Dr Michael Ryan, a consultant who deals at the front line with the consequences of diabetes, told the Health Committee that type 2 diabetes is an inevitable consequence of weight gain. He said that 90% of the patients whom he sees at his diabetes clinics have significant health problems that are related to their weight or to obesity. He also informed the Committee that, in the past, type 2 diabetes was called “maturity-onset diabetes” and that it was considered to be a condition that developed in older people. He said:

“Nowadays, I see 18 and 19-year-old people with that condition, and paediatricians are seeing it in the under 16s. That was unheard of.”

He also said that the lifespan of a person who is diagnosed with diabetes is reduced by approximately 10 to 15 years. That makes startling reading.

Obesity and its impact on the health of the population have been described to the Committee as an epidemic that is facing society. Up to 60% of all adults here are overweight or obese, and one paediatrician told the Committee that 100,000 of the 400,000 children across the North are overweight or obese and that some 60% to 70% of them will be obese as adults. Those are shocking statistics.

The scale of the problem is alarming, but it is more alarming that the doctors who work on the front line are telling us that the situation is reaching crisis point. They state that there are no services for the patients concerned, and they have argued strongly that the patients' fundamental problem will not go away until the obesity issue has been addressed.

The Committee's inquiry into obesity has been ongoing for some time and is nearing completion. As yet, however, we have not reached any conclusions or made our recommendations, so I cannot say whether the Committee will be calling for a diabetes service framework. However, today's debate will inform us about that, and I expect that the problems with the lack of services for treating those with obesity-related illnesses, particularly type 2 diabetes, will feature highly in the Committee's report.

I will make some comments in my capacity as Sinn Féin's health spokesperson. It is clear that inequalities exist in care for people with diabetes across the North,

and one problem appears to be that access to services is dependent on where one lives. It is imperative that we promote an equal right to healthcare, and we need to ensure that inequalities in our healthcare system are eradicated and that we have a society in which everyone, based on need, has equal access to the highest-quality healthcare. Furthermore, there needs to be a clear focus on public health, and we need to tackle the socio-economic and cultural determinants of ill health. The new Public Health Agency provides an excellent opportunity to do that. Its duty is to focus on public health awareness and on education so that general awareness of the importance of a healthy lifestyle and its effects on one's long-term health is raised.

As Jim Shannon said when moving the motion, there is a high prevalence of diabetes here that needs to be tackled now. As he also said, we are aware that there is a possibility that three core standards will be proposed under the cardiovascular service framework. However, the groups on the ground feel that that is not sufficient and that more improvements are required. I welcome any improvements that have been made, and I welcome the three standards that have been set, but it is clear that more needs to be done. I support the motion.

Mr McCallister: I thank and congratulate Members for securing the debate today. It is an important issue, and it is imperative that we debate it at this time.

Several key areas are pertinent to the motion. It is good that the Minister is in the Chamber and that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has made a longstanding commitment to work on this area. The Deputy Chairperson of the Health Committee talked about the Committee's important work on the inquiry into obesity.

The evidence that the Committee is receiving highlights dramatically that we will be sitting on a time bomb if we do not address and get to grips with the problem of obesity and all the elements of it that relate to health. We will be debating one of the key aspects of that this afternoon. When that report is finished, it will be a useful reference point in developing policy to deal with diabetes.

The Public Health Agency has been one of the most forward-thinking policy developments that we have had from the Assembly and the Minister. It enables us to put the spotlight on the public health agenda to an extent that has not been done in any other part of the United Kingdom or, indeed, in very few parts of Europe. The agency is such an important aspect. As the debate develops, Members will talk about how important it is to get diabetes on to the public health agenda.

All the evidence that the Committee has been considering indicates that we have to engage the public in looking at lifestyle choices and at issues such as

diet. We must address the health inequalities that exist, such as the differences in life expectancy that occur due to the areas in which people are born. The public health agenda and the work of the Public Health Agency will be key in addressing the huge rise in the incidence of diabetes. In his opening remarks, Mr Shannon talked about the prevalence, and rise in the incidence of, diabetes. For the Public Health Agency, prevention and looking at issues such as lifestyle and diet are the only ways in which that rise will be tackled.

I was pleased to hear the Minister, in his intervention during Mr Shannon's speech, talking about the work of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on the issue. It will be interesting to hear more about the Department's response; how it is working with some of the national service frameworks; and how that work is continuing to evolve to meet the needs of people with diabetes across Northern Ireland.

Mr P Ramsey: Like other Members, I am delighted to participate in the debate. Like Jim Shannon, I declare a personal interest in the subject, as someone who has type 2 diabetes. It was diagnosed around March last year and I am now insulin-dependent. When people are told that they have diabetes, the news comes as a great shock to the system and it takes a long time to acclimatise the body to the changes needed. Diabetics need to make important lifestyle changes, particularly with regard to weight loss; something that we all endeavour to achieve.

Since being told that I have diabetes, I have developed a natural interest in the subject. I have become aware of service deficiencies and, naturally, I want everyone with diabetes to be able to receive the best quality of treatment available. I certainly got that standard at Altnagelvin Hospital, having spent two overnight visits there over a period of three weeks. As Jim Shannon said, people across Northern Ireland should receive the same standard of treatment and care regardless of their postcode. We all want Northern Ireland to be a centre of excellence.

I have written to the Minister in the past and I know how heavily the Department is involved in improving care. However, centres of excellence are needed across Northern Ireland to ensure that the incidence of diabetes is reduced and that we do not have a postcode lottery with respect to diabetes services.

We are all aware that Departments and trusts in England, Scotland and Wales have been working very hard to advance integrated diabetes strategies. There is a concern among advocates of that system that the Department here intends to address the diabetes problem through the vehicle of the service framework for cardiovascular health and well-being, as Jim Shannon mentioned earlier. Therefore, the motion has been tabled to encourage and promote approaches

through a different type of framework. Perhaps the Minister will shed some light on this later, when he responds to the debate.

We are all — not just individuals — grateful to Diabetes UK for the work that it carries out to deliver, promote and advocate across the sector, not only in Northern Ireland, but in Britain. I must say this to the Minister: Diabetes UK clearly makes the point that a cardiovascular service framework will address some, but not all, of the issues that need to be addressed to provide timely diagnosis, treatment and, most importantly, education about the condition. It points out that there should be a specific diabetes strategy that is delivered evenly across Northern Ireland, regardless of postcode.

Given the limited time available for the debate, I will not go into detail about the various elements that should be in the strategy and how those elements must be co-ordinated and managed. We are fortunate that work has already been carried out in other regions, and we should use that work as a model of best practice. However, I want to raise two issues of concern. The first is the increasing incidence of type 2 diabetes, which, as we all know from existing evidence, is about lifestyle. It is imperative that we change our attitudes and food habits and, most importantly, that we exercise. It may be appropriate for the Executive to examine the Scottish model of using some of the health budget for the provision and promotion of sport and exercise.

The second issue is that recent research that I have been made aware of forecasts that the incidence of diabetes in the under-fives is set to double by 2020. That is a huge concern, given that the cause of the increase is not yet known. When the cause is not known, prevention is not possible. I invite the Minister to say whether the Department expects such an increase in type 1 diabetes in the under-fives and to outline how the Department plans to treat the additional numbers of children who will require heavy-duty care under the National Health Service.

In conclusion, I hope that the Minister will be in a position to say that a service framework for diabetes is still on the Department's agenda and that it will be taken forward in the near future. That would be a hugely important step. I know that other Members have said that they support the motion but do not support the creation of a diabetes service framework. It is obvious to anyone involved with diabetes that we need a framework. We need greater capacity to deal with the condition, and the more we find out about the condition, the more we realise that such a framework is needed. That is why this all-party motion was tabled. I support the motion.

Mr Neeson: I welcome the debate and the formation of the all-party Assembly group on diabetes, of which I am very pleased to be a member. I declare an interest; about four years ago, I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. However, I have been able to keep it under control by taking tablets and through diet and exercise, although I must admit that I would like to be getting a lot more exercise than I am currently.

Members have mentioned that obesity is one of the main causes of the condition. I must question that; although I believe that obesity may be a cause, it is not always the case that it is. Diabetes can be a genetic condition. I discovered only a few months ago that my grandfather died of diabetes a number of years ago, so that issue must be taken into consideration.

There is no doubt that diabetes will be a major problem for the Health Service in the future. Detection at the earliest opportunity is vital. The GP that I attend is proactive in testing patients for diabetes, and I encourage all GPs throughout Northern Ireland to do likewise.

Diabetes is not a new issue for me. In the year that I was Mayor of Carrickfergus, a diabetes charity benefited from the mayor's breakfast.

1.15 pm

According to Diabetes UK, the evidence on early detection is conclusive. Early intervention and effective medical care and self-care will prevent or postpone diabetes complications for most people. There is a need to create a greater awareness of diabetes in Northern Ireland, which is why the motion calls for "a standalone Diabetes Service Framework". The European Centre for Connected Health deals with chronic chest disease, chronic heart disease and diabetes. Therefore, there is also a need for a stand-alone framework at international level.

The growing number of young people who are diagnosed with diabetes is worrying. There is a responsibility for educating not only parents, but children, in diet and exercise. That should form part of the school curriculum, which is why we need a dedicated regional strategy to address the issue. It might be worthwhile for the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to get together to see whether they can devise some form of education framework to advise young people about the need for exercise, as Mr Ramsey said.

I support the motion. It is in the interests of all Members to make people more aware of the outcomes and the dangers of diabetes and of how some people have suffered greatly as a result. Such an awareness, particularly in education, would be advantageous.

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion. Diabetes is known as the "silent killer", and it represents one of

the biggest challenges facing the health system in Northern Ireland. It is alarming that the cost of treating Northern Ireland's increased level of diabetes has risen to £1 million a day, and that underscores the immense pressure that the condition is placing on the health budget. More than 62,000 people suffer from diabetes here, and an estimated further 20,000 are unaware that they suffer from it. Those figures are set to soar to 100,000 by 2015, so urgent action must be taken to establish a strategy to deal effectively with the condition. It is unacceptable that type 2 diabetes can remain undetected for 10 years or more before it is diagnosed, which means that, for many people, serious implications have already begun to develop, causing ill health and reduced life expectancy.

It is a fact that diabetes is the fourth-largest cause of death worldwide, and it is the leading cause of blindness in Northern Ireland. It results in a fivefold increase in the risk of heart disease, a threefold increase in the risk of a stroke, and people with diabetes are 15 times more likely to undergo an amputation. It is one of the main causes of end-of-life renal failure; it causes depression in up to 30% of those who suffer from the condition; and it causes more deaths than breast cancer and prostate cancer combined. Therefore, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety must introduce urgently a stand-alone diabetes service framework for Northern Ireland, as has been introduced already in England, Scotland and Wales. The benefits of doing that are widely recognised.

In 2006, the United Nations called for Governments to create national diabetes programmes to tackle the epidemic. It is a sad reflection on the Health Service in Northern Ireland that ours is one of the few areas in the world that has not yet implemented such a strategy.

Concern is growing at the fact that diabetes may be included only in a cardiovascular service framework, rather than in a stand-alone framework. Although any past or present initiative that the Minister and his Department has introduced to tackle diabetes is welcome, it is simply not enough to include it in another framework. The cardiovascular service framework addresses only three areas that are specific to diabetes and fails to address diabetes prevention, diagnostics and treatment. It also fails to make commitments or set targets in order to tackle the disease.

For example, everyone with diabetes should have his or her condition diagnosed within 12 months of their developing the disease. All diabetic patients should have access to education about their condition, as well as receiving emotional and psychological support. All patients should be offered a review of their condition by a suitable, qualified treatment team at least once a year. Additional commitments, to name but a few, should be an end to the postcode lottery of

care; stringent targets to ensure real change; information technology systems to record prevalence of diabetes; specific strategies for children; and effective and regular training for healthcare professionals.

Only a stand-alone diabetes service framework will adequately and effectively address that serious matter. I therefore call on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to step up to the mark and give a commitment to the House that he will establish a diabetes service framework in the next round of service framework announcements, which are due in the autumn. I have no doubt that the introduction of a stand-alone service framework for diabetes would help to reduce the huge financial cost that the treatment of diabetes places on the health budget. As the old proverb goes: prevention is better than cure. Therefore, let the Minister demonstrate to the House that he is committed to the delivery of equality in the Health Service for people across Northern Ireland. I support the motion.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the members of the all-party Assembly group on diabetes for tabling the motion, and I welcome the fact that the Minister is in the Chamber to listen to the debate.

The proposer of the motion spoke about statistics. Members sometimes list too many statistics, but, in this case, some of the statistics are so stark that it is obvious to those of us who may not be as familiar with the issue of diabetes just how much of a growing problem it is.

The Assembly's Research and Library Service provided a very helpful information pack for the debate, which included an article that appeared in the 'Belfast Telegraph' in January 2009. I was struck by a statistic reported in that article that 10 new cases of diabetes were diagnosed in Northern Ireland every day between February 2007 and February 2008. Ten cases a day seems to be a quite a large number. For the previous year, five cases were diagnosed every day.

It is clear that the House believes that a diabetes service framework should be put in place. As far back as 2007, my party colleagues Daithí McKay and Sue Ramsey had asked the Minister questions about the issue of diabetes and, more recently, about developing a service framework. Subsequently, many Members from other parties have done the same.

I agree with Members who said that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has clearly done work to address the issue. The creation of a diabetes service framework is the best way to deliver what is needed to tackle the problem.

Members mentioned what is happening in relation to diabetes in the other jurisdictions of these islands. Pat Ramsey spoke about what the Scottish Administration

are doing, and my party colleague Michelle O'Neill, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, referred to what that Administration are doing to combat inequalities in accessing diabetes services, which is a key area. If the House agrees that a diabetes service framework is required, and the Department can introduce it, location must form part of the framework. Statistics state that, if people live in a deprived or disadvantaged area, they are 2.5 times more likely to develop type 2 diabetes. That may be through no fault of their own, and they may not live near an acute hospital or have access to services or a specialist diabetes consultant. That adds to people's difficulties.

About 10 days ago, I was, by coincidence, speaking to a young teenager with diabetes who lives in my constituency. For the past two years, the young man has attended a one-week summer camp in the Mourne that is run by a diabetes charity. Attendance at the camp has benefited him because it has given him confidence as well as emotional and other forms of support. However, this year, he was not accepted because the number of young people who want to attend the camp far exceeds its capacity. His mother thought that it would be great if that one week could be extended to three weeks. I understand the young man's situation, and any new framework must deal with such issues.

Sean Neeson referred to education —

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

Mrs McGill: Education is a difficult area. What happens when a young child with diabetes moves from preschool to primary school? What practicalities are involved? A diabetes service framework should address such issues. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr G Robinson: I congratulate the Members who tabled the motion on such an important and practical health issue.

I like to think that I deal with the realities of life, and one reality is that Northern Ireland has the highest levels of diabetes in the UK. The only way to address that appalling statistic is to establish a framework that will effectively and proactively reduce those levels. Only through the introduction of a regional strategy can we tackle what is virtually a diabetes epidemic.

The motion mentions the threat posed by diabetes, which we should not underestimate. People could lose limbs and their eyesight, or they could encounter heart and severe renal problems. Their quality of life may be affected, and no one should find that acceptable. Those examples may be exceptional, but they demonstrate the need for a system that prevents such occurrences and that reduces the cost to the Department of Health,

Social Services and Public Safety in the medium to long term. The Minister must, as a matter of urgency, develop and introduce a regional strategy that effectively addresses the increase in the rate of diabetes in the community and that further prevents the awful consequences of poorly managed diabetes.

There is no question that, as with many other conditions, the correct, effective and early treatment of diabetes produces the best outcome, and the best life, for patients. That can be achieved through the use of specialist diabetes nurses who work locally and deal with people whom they get to know personally.

That helps the patient to build up trust and, therefore, a higher degree of compliance with any medication that they need to take. That is one way to address the issues in the debate. However, any increase in specialist nurses must be properly resourced to ensure maximum effectiveness through a multi-professional approach, including the use of dietitians and specialist doctors.

1.30 pm

Undoubtedly, an interdepartmental approach will have to be taken to maximise the effectiveness of the regional strategy. I am sure that the Minister will be mindful of that when considering what steps he will take. To ensure that a regional strategy becomes a reality for Northern Ireland, I urge all Members to support the motion. An effective regional strategy will increase effective and consistent treatment across the Province and, most importantly, reduce the impact on people who live daily with diabetes.

Mr K Robinson: As a member of the all-party group, I support the motion. I thank Diabetes UK Northern Ireland for the sterling work that it carries out on behalf of those who have been diagnosed with the condition. Those of us who visited a very wet Stormont on Saturday will know of some of the work that that organisation carries out in adverse conditions.

The organisation's activities have raised public awareness of diabetes and contributed to focused research on the incidence, impact and costs that are associated with what in many cases could be an avoidable situation. The growing rates of obesity in Northern Ireland are indicators of a predictable growth in the number of cases of type 2 diabetes that will impact on the lives of individuals, families and society.

It is reckoned that the cost associated with the treating of diabetes and its complications currently stands at about £1 million a day in Northern Ireland. That is a staggering £365 million per annum out of the health budget. What could the Minister of Health do if he had more freedom to move that sum of money around? Therefore, it is obvious that any further steps that can be taken to reduce the avoidable expenditure must be taken immediately, because the number of

undiagnosed cases of diabetes will add considerably to those costs.

It is now reckoned that 25% of men and 23% of women in Northern Ireland are obese. Obesity among school-age children is growing alarmingly. Lifestyle choices such as healthy eating and regular exercise will, if properly presented, help to reduce the overall numbers of future cases, but only if there is a cultural shift in public attitudes towards physical activity and the foods that are consumed. The battle to instil the dangers of drink-driving and, more latterly, of smoking into the public psyche shows that, with the commitment of government and the putting of the stark facts in front of the population, attitudes can be changed for the benefit not only of individuals but of the whole of society.

The struggle against diabetes must enter a similar phase. Although groups such as Diabetes UK can take the message out to the public, all agencies of government have a central role to play. The devolved Administration have an opportunity to catch up with our counterparts in the rest of the UK. In Northern Ireland, 65,000 people are diagnosed with diabetes, and an estimated 12,500 people have the condition but remain undiagnosed. Those people deserve help, advice, support and treatment on a par with their fellows across the water.

Recently, a member of my family was diagnosed with diabetes. It was quite a shock, not only to the individual but to the whole family. There had been no outward symptoms; the condition is often picked up, as Pat Ramsey said, in a random way. It is lying out there as a time bomb.

The Chamber will recognise that Minister Michael McGimpsey has been proactive in the pursuit of his brief, and a challenge remains on the current approach to diabetes here that he can and must address. His Department's draft service framework for cardiovascular health and well-being makes three specific references to diabetes and outlines the potential impact of diabetes on many aspects of life and how it can be treated. However, a more proactive approach must be taken, given that diabetes is a hidden killer.

That is in sharp contrast to what is happening in England. My colleague Pat Ramsey mentioned the process in Scotland, which seems to form a clear framework and brings the agencies together. A National Health Service framework for diabetes already exists in the three home countries.

Further reports by Clinical Resource Efficiency Support Team (CREST) in 2003, the Regional Multiprofessional Audit Group (RMAG) in 2008 and the Northern Ireland Audit Office all indicate what needs to be done but state that the full impact on reducing type 2 diabetes has yet to be realised. A submission by Diabetes UK notes that, although the

Health Service is effective at treating the complications of diabetes, it fails to prevent growth in the prevalence of the condition. It further suggests that specific actions, some of which have been mentioned already, are needed, such as the introduction to Northern Ireland of a diabetes service framework; targeted screening of the at-risk groups; targeted action to establish diabetes managed clinical networks in each trust area; and ensuring that everyone with diabetes is offered high-quality patient care.

We all realise that in the Health Service resources are stretched.

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

Mr K Robinson: If the epidemics of obesity and diabetes remain unchecked, even greater strains will emerge if they are to be treated and managed. However, we now have an opportunity to contain the situation and use our limited resources to prevent such a scenario or, at least, dramatically reduce its impact on our citizens, the Health Service and its finite budget.

Mr Molloy: A LeasCheann Comhairle, go raibh maith agat. I welcome the debate and thank Jim Shannon for tabling the motion, which I support. I must declare interests: I suffer from type 2 diabetes, and I am also a member of the all-party working group.

I probably had diabetes for some time before it was diagnosed. That is the problem. Unless a need or an issue brings it to attention, it is possible to live with diabetes for a long time before it is diagnosed. The consequences for the patient can then increase. A large number of people are walking about, not realising that they have diabetes. Early diagnosis and treatment are important; so, too, is a greater public awareness.

Look at the different diseases that are affecting people at present. There has been an increase in public awareness of some of the major illnesses, and we need to put diabetes on a par with those, otherwise we will become complacent.

In some areas, so many people suffer from diabetes that it has become almost normal. Therefore, it is not as big a shock to the system as it would have been some years back. We need to up the ante to ensure that people are fully aware of the consequences of diabetes.

The motion highlights the prevalence of diabetes in the North, and yet we have no idea why that is so. Is it the food, the diet, or the way we cook? Those are some of the issues. We are all very fond of an Ulster fry, and various different structures around it. However, there is no alternative. With diabetes, everything that seems to be nice is banned.

It is important that we look at the causes of diabetes, how it should be treated and how we can make people

more aware of it. We should also make families more aware of it. I find, going from one house to another, that I am offered cake and biscuits and nice things and I must refuse them. Sometimes, in order to be pleasant, I accept. Greater awareness is needed in the wider community; those who suffer are sometimes all too aware of it. That also applies to establishments.

Mr Shannon: The Member will agree that it is important to have willpower and not yield to temptation.

Mr Molloy: That affects so many different things. You can have only so much willpower.

The Assembly could give an example. All establishments that put on events and functions could cater better for those suffering from diabetes and make people more aware of the needs of diabetics and how they can be catered for. Tea, coffee and biscuits are provided in every Committee but not fresh fruit. Even the mints at the Speaker's Desk are a great temptation to Deputy Speakers. We may need a new diet structure in the Assembly. The salt content in the food served in the basement canteen and restaurants is all part of it. Therefore, we must raise awareness among those who host Assembly events so that they can try to cater for diabetic people's needs.

I welcome the setting up of the all-party group, the focus of which must be to identify and highlight the needs of diabetic people. A clear framework must be put in place to ensure that appropriate structures are created. The Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament have taken that step and have established frameworks that will help to develop diabetes strategies.

Many local issues must be tackled. Greater awareness must be created across the board to ensure that diabetic people are treated properly and receive ongoing services. The Health Service provides good support, on which nurses and doctors must be congratulated. There is no room for complacency, however; that support must be increased. The general public must be made aware of and be able to identify at an early stage the symptoms of diabetes, so that early diagnosis can be ensured.

Mr Bresland: During the past few years, the rise in the number of patients who have been diagnosed with diabetes has been alarming. It is predicted that the number of diagnoses will continue to rise, resulting in more than 84,000 estimated cases of adult diabetes by 2015. Given the current high level of childhood obesity, that may well prove to be an underestimation.

Diabetes has been shown to be a major drain on health and productivity resources for the healthcare system. Bearing in mind the prediction of dramatic rises in the number of adults with diabetes, that drain will become worse and will direct resources away from other areas. To ensure that the healthcare system is

capable of dealing with that increase and to help to lower the number of new cases it is necessary that a dedicated diabetes framework be established. Northern Ireland is the only country in the UK and one of the few in the world that does not have a dedicated diabetes framework. Therefore, Northern Ireland is behind the curve. Unless there is change soon, we will suffer the full cost of that.

A dedicated diabetes framework must focus on three areas: education, early diagnosis, and yearly reviews. If the public were properly educated on how to prevent diabetes through measures such as breastfeeding, eating sufficient fibre and taking enough exercise, it might be possible to reduce the number of new cases against currently predicted levels. At present, it takes a number of years for diabetes to be diagnosed, by which stage many patients have developed additional complications that could have been prevented. For that reason, diabetic people deserve a service framework that focuses not only on diagnosis of diabetes but on early diagnosis.

The only way to reduce the number and severity of complications such as blindness, strokes, amputations and kidney failure is through early diagnosis. That has additional benefits for the Health Service; if there are fewer complications with diabetes cases, it need not spend as much money to treat them. That money could be directed towards research and education.

Diabetes is a lifelong condition. Even with early detection, it can lead to complications. People who have diabetes are more likely to suffer from depression, heart disease and strokes. The level of premature death among sufferers is also high. To reduce the risk of complications that occur later and to increase the life expectancy of people who suffer from diabetes, it is essential that sufferers have annual health checks through which it will be possible for doctors to detect the early signs of complications and to begin to treat them before more serious problems develop.

1.45 pm

It has been suggested that diabetes should be included in a cardiovascular framework that also focuses on the areas that I have outlined. However, although the standards included in the cardiovascular framework are a start, they do not do enough to deal sufficiently with the problems that will be caused in the coming years by the increase in cases of diabetes. Therefore, in order to follow the example set by the rest of the UK and most of the world, it is essential that Northern Ireland introduces a diabetes service framework, which will effectively protect people with diabetes from complications and reduce the number of new cases. I support the motion and call on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to introduce such a framework as soon as possible.

Dr Deeny: I support the motion and welcome the Minister's presence during this important debate.

Patients with diabetes deserve not only the best medication and treatment but the best management of their condition. Many Members referred to the cardiovascular service framework, and some argued that it is sufficient to tackle diabetes. I contend that it is not. I will use three standards in the cardiovascular framework to explain how the document does not meet the needs of the management of diabetes in the modern day.

The cardiovascular service framework fails to address and will not provide a solution to many issues associated with diabetes. Overarching standard 12 says:

"All people with diabetes should have an accurate diagnosis made."

As Mr Molloy said, early diagnosis is paramount. Although I do not want to be too cynical, it is difficult to diagnose somebody who has a very high blood sugar level with anything other than diabetes. Therefore, accurate diagnosis is not the issue; it is the speed of diagnosis that is crucial.

Mr Bresland said failure to diagnose the condition early could lead to many other conditions that not only cause ill health in individuals but add to the cost of necessary health services. Early diagnosis of diabetes is a preventive measure, and, through early detection, we hope to reduce the number and severity of complications such as amputations, blindness, heart disease, kidney failure and stroke.

Overarching standard 12 discusses how new cases of diabetes are measured. It refers to measurement, in general practice, by the quality and outcomes framework (QOF). However, that is not the case: QOF cannot accurately record the number of people who are newly diagnosed with diabetes because it does not account for people who have passed away or moved house since the previous year's register. The standard should include provision to the effect that early diagnoses should be made and that sufficient systems should be established to monitor new cases, the delay in diagnosis and the presence of any complications.

I welcome the fact that overarching standard 13 in the cardiovascular service framework says:

"All patients with diabetes should have access to structured education programmes and emotional and psychological support."

That is good. Diabetic patients require education, and it is important to equip them with the necessary tools to manage their diabetes from day to day. Moreover, emotional and psychological support is important. The strong link between diabetes and mental health, which we see in general practice, is a largely unknown fact, and 40% of diabetics will experience a mental health condition, such as depression or anxiety, at some stage.

The standard has some problems. I have been told that the structured education programmes are provided in all areas in Northern Ireland except the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area. All providers of healthcare in Northern Ireland must prioritise diabetes and give it its proper place. That is not the case at the moment.

There is a lack of consistency. The postcode lottery of care has been mentioned, and specific programmes should be agreed to correct that lack of consistency so that care is available uniformly. Standard 13 of the service framework for cardiovascular health and well-being, which refers to structured education programmes and emotional and psychological support, would be improved greatly by the addition of a stipulated programme, preferably one that is recommended by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE). Those include programmes such as diabetes education and self management for ongoing and newly diagnosed (DESMOND) or dose adjustment for normal living (DAFNE).

Overarching standard 14 of the service framework for cardiovascular health and well-being states:

"All patients with diabetes should have access to, at a minimum, an annual review to a defined standard by an appropriately trained multidisciplinary team."

That is too vague. For example, what is a "defined standard"?

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

Dr Deeny: If we had our own diabetes service framework, we could ensure that the full range of health checks could be provided and that all patients would receive the same level of care with annual checks on blood pressure, weight and diet, foot care, peripheral vascular disease, blood measurements and full eye examinations. I urge Members to support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate and to bring the Assembly up to date on the Department's diabetes strategy, which was developed in 2003. I emphasise my commitment to helping diabetics, and I am doing all that I can to prevent diabetes.

It is not true to say that we do not have a diabetes strategy or framework. My Department has been developing its policies on that area for years. Indeed, one of the first messages that I got from the Department when I walked in two years ago was that, if we did not work on the preventative measures that we are taking and exploring now, diabetes would overwhelm the Health Service within 20 years. I have repeated that message time and again to the House and to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public

Safety. Diabetes is a lifelong condition, and it is estimated that 60,000 people have it, which is about 3% of the population. If we do not stem the rise in obesity in less than a decade, the number of diabetics will increase by at least 15,000. That represents a major challenge for health and social care services and for public health.

The rise in the level of diabetes has a massive impact on individuals' health, and it presents a real challenge for our health services. If we do not make progress, the Health Service as we know it will be overwhelmed within 20 years. A person with diabetes is five times more likely to die of a heart attack and three times more likely to die from a stroke. Diabetes is the leading cause of kidney failure, accounting for more than one in six people who start dialysis treatment. That was one of the issues that I fought for during the Budget discussions, when I was told that dialysis and renal services were not regarded as inescapable pressures. I made the point to the then Minister of Finance and Personnel and his Department that, without those services, people in need of them would come to harm. I argued that point with the Department of Finance and Personnel's officials, who tried to tell me that those services were not regarded as inescapable pressures and that I had a choice as to whether I provided them.

Diabetes is the most common reason for limb amputation and is a leading cause of blindness among people of working age. Some risk factors, such as family history and increasing age, cannot be changed. However, other risk factors, such as obesity, lack of exercise and smoking, must be tackled if we are to prevent diabetes and its complications. The new Public Health Agency will have a significant part to play in that regard. One of the reasons that I argued for a public health agency was to address health inequalities, particularly in disadvantaged and deprived areas. I wanted to improve outcomes for people in those areas, particularly where their life expectancy and quality of life were concerned.

I was interested to hear Tom Buchanan say that, if we do these things, rising costs will be addressed. He said that the lack of a strategy was a sad reflection on us and that we should do more on prevention. In fact, we have a strategy already, and, after the matter was debated in the House and by the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, one of the key steps that my Department took was to establish the new Public Health Agency. Tom Buchanan and his colleagues voted against the establishment of the Public Health Agency. It shows a measure of hypocrisy that the party that voted against everyone else thinks that there need not be a Public Health Agency that has been designed specifically for this kind of work.

Through significant investment and a co-ordinated approach over several years, we have witnessed many changes for the better in the care and treatment of diabetes. The action needed to deal with the rise in diabetes requires a cross-departmental approach. I am disappointed that no one sought to mention the Fit Futures policy, which is another key strand in our programme against obesity. Fit Futures involves working with children of school age across departmental boundaries with the Department of Education and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. It plays another key part in our strategy.

Since 2003, my Department has had a dedicated strategy for diabetes services. That is why I find today's motion somewhat baffling. The strategy that my Department published in 2003 was developed by the Clinical Resource Efficiency Support Team (CREST) and included Diabetes UK. CREST includes primary and secondary care workers, clinicians, trusts, boards, interested practitioners and Diabetes UK. The previous chief executive of Diabetes UK in Northern Ireland was a lady who played an important part in setting out the strategy, which includes standards for the prevention, early detection, ongoing care and treatment of diabetes.

Ken Robinson reflected on the Northern Ireland Audit Office. He neglected to say that in its 2009 report the Northern Ireland Audit Office acknowledged the Department's commitment and actions taken in respect of primary prevention, early detection and intervention to halt the rise in obesity and diabetes.

With the strategy in place, and significant investment to the tune of over £10 million recurrently since 2003, we have made a number of advances. Some Members have mentioned the new cardiovascular service framework that is about to be published. Diabetes was first in the queue to be dealt with by way of a service framework. The cardiovascular service framework will contain some issues that will also address diabetes.

I note with interest the points that Dr Kieran Deeny made. I presume that he has made those points throughout the consultation process; if not, I will ensure that we look at them before the publication of the service framework. He made points that, in my opinion, needed to be made.

Our strategy has various points. Investments have been made and extra staff have been recruited to provide services for people with diabetes, including specialist diabetic nurses, dieticians and podiatrists. Another key building block is the retinopathy service, the comprehensive eye-screening programme, that I launched around 18 months ago. The strategy means that everyone with diabetes over the age of 12 will be

screened annually, so that we can intervene much earlier to prevent unnecessary blindness.

We have also invested in GP practices to ensure the provision of good quality care for people with diabetes. We have made investment available to GP practices to monitor and follow up on patients who have a body mass index of over 30 and are at risk of developing diabetes or other chronic diseases. We have also invested in tackling obesity and lower levels of physical activity.

Diabetes represents a major risk factor for the onset of cardiovascular disease, stroke and renal disease. As part of the current budget, I have invested £12 million in cardiovascular services, £14 million in stroke services and £11 million to expand renal services. Members will recall that I had to fight to get that extra money, and I was grateful for the support that I got in the Chamber in that fight with the Department of Finance and Personnel and the then Finance Minister.

Thanks to that investment, patients can notice the difference and see that somebody really cares about their diabetic control as well as their blood pressure. There are greater numbers of diabetes specialist nurses not only to take care of the clinical needs of patients but to deal with any concerns that patients may have.

2.00 pm

As I said, there have been significant changes in the way that we move forward, not least because of the review of public administration and the establishment of the Public Health Agency. I referred to that agency, because its remit is to improve and protect the health and well-being of our population. The agency brings together a wide range of existing public-health functions to ensure better co-ordination of its remit for health improvement, health protection and service development. It will also work with partners, such as local government, to ensure that people take responsibility for their own health.

We have consulted a wide range of people during the development of our service frameworks and strategies. As I said, in addition to the steps in the new cardiovascular framework, we will constantly seek to reform and refine the existing strategy for diabetes that was developed by CREST and Diabetes UK. Other frameworks will be forthcoming.

Some Members are confused about the difference between a service framework and a regional strategy; they are two different things, and it is important to understand that. In addition to standards for diabetes, the new service framework includes standards for healthy eating, smoking cessation, obesity, physical activity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, foot care, heart disease, strokes and renal disease, all of which are linked to diabetes. As I said, I accept the points that Dr Deeny made about the framework.

Who voted against a ban on the display of tobacco products at retail outlets, which was our latest step to try to prevent smoking? DUP Members, including Tom Buchanan, voted against it and against the establishment of the Public Health Agency. Where is my teenage-drinking action plan, which I sent to the Executive in March 2009? It is still sitting with the Executive despite having the agreement of all Ministers. It is still sitting with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That does not show a commitment to the areas that we are discussing. Tom Buchanan spoke about measures that will help to reduce costs: we will help to reduce costs to the Health Service if we can deal with drinking, smoking, obesity, high blood pressure, lack of physical activity and all the issues that we say that we want to address.

On its website, Diabetes UK identifies five key actions that will help to address diabetes here. The first is the development of a comprehensive register of diabetics in Northern Ireland. That has already been established in GP practices through the quality and outcomes framework. The second is better co-ordination of services between primary and secondary care; the new Health and Social Care Board was established for that very purpose. The third is addressing the inadequacy of psychological support to which Dr Deeny referred; the new cardiovascular service framework is addressing that inadequacy. The fourth action is a comprehensive eye-screening programme; I have already invested in the retinopathy programme. The fifth is the provision of education and advisory support services; we have invested £3 million specifically for that purpose, and the new Public Health Agency will take the lead in helping people to avoid the onset of diabetes-related diseases.

There is much work to do. I welcome the interest of Members and the establishment of the all-party Assembly group on diabetes, which is all to the good. It is not what we call our strategy or framework that counts; it is what we are doing. I want to hear from Members and the all-party group about what else they want me to do.

People can stand up and say that they want more improvements or that not enough is being done. However, specifically, what is being asked for? That is the information that I am looking for. Are we omitting or missing something from the list of measures?

Dr Deeny pointed out some measures that he believes are missing from the cardiovascular service framework. That is constructive, and that is how I and the Department want to approach this matter. I told the House two years ago that the Health Service as we know it will be overwhelmed in 20 years' time if we do not tackle diabetes, obesity and lifestyle. Hospitals are filled with people who, had they made different lifestyle choices 20 or 30 years ago, would not be there. That applies to all of us in this generation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to draw his remarks to a close.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: We must provide the next generation with the means to ensure that they make correct lifestyle choices.

Mrs Hanna: I speak in my capacity as chairperson of the all-party Assembly group on diabetes. Members will be aware that the group was established to raise awareness and understanding of diabetes. There has been remarkable interest in this matter in the Chamber, and contributions have reflected the detailed knowledge of the condition that exists among Members.

I welcome the Minister's detailed update on the strategy, and I appreciate and acknowledge all the work that is being done on that matter. I also appreciate the association of diabetes with the role of the new Public Health Agency. I am aware of the need for cross-departmental working, especially involving the Department of Education and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Although we appreciate all the work that is being done, and acknowledge its detail, it is obvious from what members of the all-party group have said that they, as I do, still feel strongly that there is a need for a specific, stand-alone diabetes service framework. That is where one will find the individual focus on diabetes. Jim Shannon, who proposed the motion and declared an interest as a diabetic, talked about prevention, type 2 diabetes and its association with premature death and obesity. He also mentioned the service framework programme and the issue of evaluation.

Michelle O'Neill spoke of the link between diabetes and obesity, and the Health Committee's inquiry into obesity. She also spoke about type 2 diabetes and mature-onset diabetes, and pointed out that more young people are presenting with type 2 diabetes. Michelle also mentioned healthcare inequalities, and the link between diabetes and general ill health.

John McCallister spoke about the work of the Health Committee, and the role that we expect and hope that the Public Health Agency will play in preventing diabetes and tackling lifestyle changes.

Pat Ramsey declared an interest as a diabetic. He spoke about the high-quality treatment that he has received at Altnagelvin Hospital, but wanted reassurance that such treatment is available throughout Northern Ireland. He mentioned centres of excellence, lifestyle, the importance of exercise and diet, and the emphasis in schools on exercise and sport — all matters whereby cross-departmental working is important. He talked about the Scottish model of promoting sport, and the expected rise in childhood diabetes, which is worrying.

Sean Neeson also declared an interest as a diabetic who is, thankfully, managing to keep it under control. He made the important point that diabetes is not always linked to obesity. It is important that although we must tackle obesity, we ensure that diabetes is not stigmatised because of its association with obesity.

Tom Buchanan talked about statistics, the cost of diabetes to the Health Service, and the urgent need for a framework for prevention, diagnostics, timescales for diagnosis and reviews, and the recording of information.

Claire McGill spoke about the huge and growing problem of a 100% increase in new cases of diabetes in the past year. A framework would present a better system and ensure that attention is focused on the huge health programme. She also mentioned the usefulness of summer camps.

George Robinson talked about Northern Ireland having the highest levels of diabetes in the UK, the threat to health that is caused by complications with diabetes and the preventative role that a framework would play. Ken Robinson talked about raising awareness, research and information, prevention, the connection with obesity, and the need for a change in lifestyles and attitudes. We all acknowledge that the Minister has been proactive, but the Government need to play a central role and do more to catch up.

Francie Molloy, who is a diabetic and a member of the all-party group on diabetes, mentioned the need for a framework. He also talked about upping our game to tackle diabetes, prevention, raising awareness and the need to change diets. His suggestion for fruit to be supplied at Committee meetings rather than biscuits is a good one. I am the first to put up my hand and admit that I sometimes give in to temptation. Although we all know what we should eat, we do not always eat the right things.

Allan Bresland gave some statistics and talked about the costs of obesity to the Health Service, its complications and the importance of prevention.

Kieran Deeny spoke about the better management of services. He said that diabetes does not fit into the cardiovascular framework and that it needs to be dealt with by a specific framework. Dr Deeny also talked about the importance of early diagnosis, the speed of diagnosis, how new cases are recorded and measured, the need for more education, the links with mental ill-health and the lack of consistency.

I appreciate that diabetes is a priority for the Department, but there must be a specific focus. More and more children are having type 2 diabetes diagnosed, which is very worrying given its associations with obesity. Prevention is vital, and the new Public Health Agency needs to take the lead role in that. There must be much better health promotion and an awareness of the complications that are associated with diabetes,

which include problems with the heart, kidneys, feet, limbs and eyes. There is a need for blood-sugar screening, especially among people in high-risk groups, to reduce the number of undiagnosed. That would be particularly helpful in respect of type 2 diabetes.

Children and young people need a lot of support in managing their diabetes. The summer camps that Claire McGill talked about are a good idea and could help in that regard. People with long-term conditions such as diabetes need help and care from a range of healthcare professionals. They need access to regular training and updating on diabetes, and people must work in partnership to deliver a joined-up service. Healthcare organisations need an opportunity to prioritise diabetes care.

Diabetes UK told us that diabetes costs £1 million a day in Northern Ireland, and the Health Service also bears the costs of the complications that are associated with obesity. I appreciate that a lot of work is being done, but a specific focus needs to be put on diabetes and its prevention. We need to introduce the framework to address the complexity of need. There must be equitable access to that framework to raise efficiency standards and to reduce the unacceptable variations between trusts across Northern Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the threat posed by the ever increasing rates of diabetes; notes that Northern Ireland has the highest prevalence of the disease in the UK (5.4%) and remains the only area not to have a dedicated regional strategy to address the issue; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to introduce a stand-alone diabetes service framework.

2.15 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Decline in Bee Population

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

Mr Cree: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the decline in the bee population in Northern Ireland and the potential impact this trend may have on agriculture, the environment, and the wider economy; further notes the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' investment in research into bee population decline in England and the publication of a bee health strategy for England; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to invest in local research into bee health and to publish a bee health strategy.

The decline in the number of bees all over the world, but especially in Europe, poses a major threat not just to honey production but to the pollination of plants leading to food production. According to the Institute of Northern Ireland Beekeepers, about 50% of Northern Ireland's honeybees vanished in 2008. The reason for their decline was given as colony collapse disorder, which means that bees disappear from their hives without a trace. Sir Roland Jackson, who is the chief executive of the British Science Association, tells us that the UK bee population has undergone radical change over the past few years and that billions of bees are dying from unknown causes.

Europe has taken the matter seriously, and at the end of November 2008, the European Parliament adopted a motion for the resolution of problems in bee-keeping. The motion called on all 27 EU Governments and the European Commission, which administers Europe's common agricultural policy, to take urgent action. After a lengthy debate, Westminster supported the initiative and called for more urgent action to protect the bee population.

In the UK alone, bees contribute £165 million a year to the economy through pollination, and they play a crucial role in pollinating 90 commercial crops worldwide. It has been estimated that up to one third of bees in the UK have been destroyed by diseases, parasites and pesticides since last autumn. We need more research into those areas and a pooling of knowledge among member states. However, it all begins with a realisation that there is a problem. Nature's number one pollinating machine appears to be breaking down and no one knows for sure why. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) made a start by making some £4.3 million available over the next five years to support the work of the national bee unit and bee health research. Some

of the UK's major research funders have joined together to launch an important new research programme. The purpose is to develop a better understanding of the complex relationships between the biological and environmental factors that affect the health and lifespan of pollinators.

The European Union is developing legislation that will include a clause on pesticides harmful to honeybee health. Some pesticides have been identified as harmful, and others are thought to build up in the pollen that bees take back to their hives and feed to their young.

Recent tests in Germany following large-scale bee die-offs showed that 29 out of 30 bees examined had a build-up of lethal chemicals in their bodies. Legislation is being developed and is not likely to be implemented in the UK until 2011, and the resultant phase-out of dangerous chemicals could take a further five years. We cannot wait that long before acting against killer chemicals; we need a complete ban on pesticide treatment while crops are in flower and a reduction in modified seed.

The British Beekeepers' Association has done excellent work in trying to ascertain what is happening to the bee population. Normal winter losses were between 5% and 10%, but, in 2006, bee-keepers had mysterious losses of between 10% and 15% over the winter. Large numbers of bees were dying, and although similarities existed to colony collapse disorder, there were differences.

The association conducted a study of 10% of its 11,500 members and found that the average loss of bees was 30%. That is three times higher than the expected level. It was, therefore, essential for the public and the Government to focus their attention on that serious situation.

In the House of Lords, replying to a question on the subject, Lord Rooker stated:

"There is no specific information on the impact that the large-scale loss of honey bees would have on the economy although it could be significant."

We must consider not only the loss of honey production but the loss of the country's principal army of pollinators. Their loss could have a devastating effect on the pollination of crops not only in the UK but across the world. It would have an impact on the environment and wildlife that depend on bees to pollinate fruit, vegetables and seeds for their survival.

In Northern Ireland, for example, the cooking-apple industries in Armagh and east Tyrone are worth approximately £25 million and £50 million respectively to the economy. The industry relies entirely on that humble insect for pollination. The Prime Minister has drawn attention to the problem of global food shortages and high transport costs. Therefore, it makes sense for every country to maximise its potential to produce

home-grown food; I am sure that the Minister will agree with me on that point.

Over recent months, I have addressed a series of questions to the Minister and have received very short responses. No sense of urgency was displayed, and the Department appeared complacent — if not in denial — about the existence of a problem. In fact, different questions from various Members of the House produced the same stereotyped reply.

All other parts of the United Kingdom have identified a problem with the bee population. In 2008, Scotland produced a honeybee health strategy, and in March 2009, DEFRA published a strategy for England and Wales called 'Healthy Bees'. I am unaware of the Irish Republic's approach, but it should be developed in concert with that of Northern Ireland; as most Members will know, bees do not recognise the border.

Conversely, the island status of Ireland presents a unique opportunity to keep out pests and diseases. The Department of Agriculture's recently produced draft contingency plan for exotic pests and diseases is out for limited consultation, but it does not address the problem of the falling bee population in Northern Ireland. The plan does not indicate that any new research is anticipated, and it makes no reference to additional resources being made available.

We need a bee health strategy that involves all the stakeholders. It must embrace effective communications, surveillance and continuous monitoring. It has to be a short, readable document, dealing with the strategy rather than the details of implementation. The strategy must include training and high standards of husbandry. It must identify adequate funding for research and facilitate work in conjunction with other regions. The funding must be on a scale that matches the threat.

Imports must be regulated and effective measures must be put in place to prevent the introduction of further parasitical infestation, whether from the importation of queen bees or other bees. Serious consideration must be given to the use of pesticides on bees and whether they create pesticide-resistant mite populations or other parasites.

Many years ago, Einstein was clearly concerned about the humble bee:

"If the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe then man would have only four years of life left. No more bees, no more pollination, no more plants, no more animals, no more man."

I am pleased to propose the motion to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the first Member to speak will be Mr Jim Shannon.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

(*Mr Speaker in the Chair*)

Oral Answers to Questions

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that we will be adopting the new format for Question Time, whereby in light of the change to Standing Orders, two Ministers will answer questions today and one will answer questions tomorrow. I also remind Members that if they wish to be called to ask a supplementary question, it is vital that they rise in their places. Some Members nod or, occasionally, wink, but that is not good enough; Members must clearly rise in their places in order to be called to ask a supplementary question. I hope that that is clear.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Public-Sector Jobs

1. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his Department's plans for the retention and creation of management and administrative posts west of the Bann.
(AQO 2891/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Under the review of public administration, the structural changes in health and social care mean that there will be fewer jobs in management and administration in all the new organisations in the longer term. Under those arrangements, more than 80% of staff will remain in their present locations and more than one third of third-level posts will not be located in the headquarters of the relevant organisation. The efficiency savings from that reduction in bureaucracy will be redirected to front line services.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he envisage a situation in which some posts at senior, director and assistant director levels in health and social care may be located outside Belfast to west of the Bann? Will he assure Members that technology will be exploited imaginatively to ensure that everybody will not have to travel to Belfast to take up senior posts?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: That is the case, although I should add a caveat by saying that there will be a considerable reduction in the number of senior executive health-

management posts from 180 to 65. Members have heard me say on a number of occasions that we are cutting 1,700 administrative and management jobs, which will save us £53 million per annum. That money will be redirected into front line services and will form part of our efficiency savings.

That said, a substantial number of posts are spread throughout the region. For example, there are no plans to move management and administrative jobs from pensions branch in Londonderry. In addition, as the Member will be aware, we have set up local commissioning arrangements in the Western Health and Social Care Trust, and local commissioners will be located in the area, so there is quite a bit of coterminosity and co-working there. It is also true to say that that is the case with the Public Health Agency.

Mr Dallat: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is probably one of the better Departments at distributing jobs throughout the North. Following the publication of the Bain Report, what progress has been made with decentralisation, which is one tool that we desperately need to use to address the awful economic difficulties that we face?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Bain Report has not been adopted by the Executive, and until that is the case, it will not be Government policy. We have examined the proposals in the Bain Report, and I am broadly satisfied that there is equity of share within the health and social care sector. However, the Bain Report has yet to be adopted. Moreover, when Sir George Bain was drawing up his report, he never came to talk to me about the subject or to discuss the impact of his proposals on health and social care. Therefore, as far as I am concerned, that piece of work was done outside the Health Service.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister detail his plans for the retention and creation of front line nursing posts west of the Bann?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Nursing posts play a key part in the delivery of services, and I have said that there will be no reduction in front line nursing posts. As I have said on a number of occasions, and am happy to repeat, I will not compromise on patient safety or quality of service. I will ensure that the right numbers of nurses are in the right place at the right time at all times.

Foster Parents

2. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action his Department is taking to make it easier for parents to foster.
(AQO 2892/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A wide range of support is in place to help foster carers, including the payment of allowances — in some cases fees and in others ad hoc payments; dedicated link workers; opportunities to participate in training; access to respite care; a range of education provision in respect of children in their care; and a 24/7 out-of-hours support helpline for foster carers. I am heartened by the steady increase in the number of foster carers that we have achieved. As of 31 March 2009, there were 1,841 foster carers: a 20% increase since 31 March 2006. However, I recognise that more needs to be done.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am pleased with the details that he has provided. Has the Department considered making available greater financial assistance to encourage more fostering?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are national allowances for foster carers, which range from £5,616 for the nought-to-four age group to £8,268 for over 16s. Fee payments are also available. The key criterion is to ensure the well-being of the child. The policy is for children to be supported in a family environment, rather than in institutions. I am pleased that almost 60% of all children in care are with foster carers. There has been a strong increase in the number of foster carers who are coming forward, and I will keep the financial situation constantly under review, because those people play a vital role in supporting almost 2,500 looked-after children.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response, in which he provided plenty of detail, as always.

As an elected representative, I have a concern that I am sure is shared by other Members, namely the large number of children who are looking for placements with foster parents. Would the Minister consider allowing foster parents to have more children allocated to them to address the backlog of those seeking foster homes?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The normal standard is that foster carers look after no more than three children. However, that rule can be broken under certain circumstances. Such circumstances might include a family connection, that children were with a specific foster carer previously, or that children are siblings. In certain such circumstances, we are prepared to exceed the usual fostering limit. As I said in my previous answer, the key is the well-being of the child; that is the paramount standard that we look at.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Considering the problem of finding foster parents, has the Minister had any discussion with voluntary and community groups about setting up information days in constituencies? Is the Minister aware that new social

security regulations may affect the benefits of some lone parents who may want to foster?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am not familiar with the detail of social security arrangements for lone parents. However, if the Member writes to me, I will undertake to reply and provide the required information.

We have a number of ways of informing the public of the need for foster carers, and television and advertising are ways of sharing that information. Mr Brady's suggestion that the Department set up information days in constituencies in association with voluntary and community groups seems sensible. If that is not happening, I will ask why the Department is not doing it.

Mrs M Bradley: There are no minimum standards for fostering services, and it has been 10 years since the previous inspection of fostering. Does the Minister agree that we need minimum standards and regulations as matter of urgency, especially in the light of the high-profile cases in England and Wales?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Member will be aware that the Department set up the regional fostering recruitment and training co-ordination service in November 2007. Through that service, we set up gateway teams, family intervention teams, looked-after teams and leaving care teams. They play an important part in referrals, because 22,000 children are referred to social services every year, and it is important that we determine which children are at risk.

The Member also asked about minimum standards. I am not aware that there are not standards, but rather than attempt to second-guess the situation, I will look at the areas on standards and write to the Member, because it is a key issue. I cannot believe that we do not have a set of minimum standards.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Domiciliary Care

4. **Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the problems with the recruitment and retention of staff who work in domiciliary care. (AQO 2894/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 30 September 2008, health and social care trusts reported 21 vacancies for that group of staff. None of those was long term; that is, over three months. That represents a vacancy rate of 1% for the staff grouping. I am aware that the recruitment and retention of domiciliary care staff can be problematic, particularly in certain geographical areas, and I keep those issues under review through my Department's workforce planning mechanism. As part of the routine

cycle, the social services workforce will be reviewed later this year. That will look at specific issues for the entire social care workforce, including domiciliary care workers. Furthermore, in the past few years, all trusts have invested significantly in NVQ level 2 training for domiciliary care workers as part of their annual in-service training programme.

Mr O'Loan: Does the Minister accept that domiciliary care resources tend to be concentrated on individuals who have high-level needs and that there remains a significant level of unmet need among those who are in lower need but who require domiciliary care?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: An individual's needs are not measured according to priority, severity or requirements. The Department groups the individual's need according to whether home help, domiciliary care, a health professional service, or residential or nursing home care is required. Each of those situations is broken down into a number of areas.

Each individual with a lower level of need is assessed so that his or her needs can be ascertained. Those needs will range from a requirement for home help, which is the services of an individual who will do the washing up, make beds, and wash and iron, to domiciliary care, which is help with personal hygiene, continence management and mobility. The needs of any person who is unable to provide for him or herself should be addressed, and that is the principle upon which the Department works.

I am not aware that the people who have lesser needs are being abandoned because those with greater needs are being addressed disproportionately. It seems to me that if an individual has a need, it should be filled, but the assessment is key.

Mr Newton: I welcome the fact that a NVQ level 2 in this area has been introduced; I believe that it is a fairly recent introduction.

Does the Minister have any plans to ensure that there is a career pathway from the level 2 qualification that may encourage those who wish to move on to other employment to stay in that field of employment?

2.45 pm

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The programme focuses on the registration and training of the workforce and on reflecting the importance of the domiciliary care workforce to the future delivery of care. We are aware of how the demographics are moving, and we are also aware of vulnerable people who require that type of support. Therefore, all trusts have made significant investment in assessing NVQ level 2 training over the past few years, and that training is very much a pathway. I agree that it should be a career pathway, not

least because of the vital service that care support workers are providing and will continue to provide. As I say, it is very much a growing demand.

Dr Deeny: I thank the Minister for his answer. Bearing in mind that, in future, much healthcare will be provided in the community, and with that will come an increase in demand for domiciliary carers, what measures will the Minister and his Department be taking to incentivise people to become domiciliary carers?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: That follows on from the previous two questions. As I reported to Mr O'Loan, we have a vacancy rate of 1%, which is very good when compared with other vacancy rates. Throughout the comprehensive spending review period, we will add 1,500 people to the number of those receiving care. I have set aside the money for that, and part of the Budget bidding process involved providing for that increase.

We must look very carefully at the wages that we are paying to ensure that we are at least comparable to the private sector. The estimated average effective rate in the statutory sector is £13.78 an hour, and that compares favourably with £12.14 an hour in the private sector. The voluntary sector is another that we must take into account. We must ensure that we are paying our employees what would be regarded as a fair rate for the work that they do.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister tell the House how many domiciliary care staff are employed through agencies? Will he state the cost of that?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I do not have to hand the number of agency staff employed in such care. The statutory workforce stands at 5,737; however, I am not clear of the headcount for patients and those people who are being supported by the statutory sector. The voluntary sector plays an important role in providing home help and domiciliary care, and so on. Another issue is the rise of the private sector, and I do not know the size of its workforce right now. I can probably find out the size of the workforce in the voluntary sector, and I am happy to write to the Member with that information.

Orthopaedic Surgery

5. **Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on targets for orthopaedic surgery. (AQO 2895/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Waiting times for orthopaedic patients have been significantly reduced in the past few years. For example, in March 2006, 5,017 people were waiting for inpatient treatment, some of whom were

waiting for up to 12 months. In contrast, at March 2009, of 3,567 people waiting, only 102 people had been waiting longer than 13 weeks for orthopaedic surgery. At 31 March 2006, 27,000 people were waiting for their first outpatient appointment, compared with 5,919 at 31 March 2009, of whom only 35 had been waiting longer than the nine-week target. Patients now consistently receive treatment within a matter of weeks. Those are considerable achievements, given that only a few short years ago, people could wait up to seven years for elective orthopaedic surgery.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I sincerely thank the Minister for his answer and for the outstanding news on waiting times for orthopaedic surgery. I congratulate him on demonstrating, once again, that he is delivering. Will the Minister guarantee that he will continue to focus on the issue so that further progress can be made in that area and others for the benefit of all our patients?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: I must mention the caveat that much depends on there being adequate resources, but I can guarantee that waiting times have been dramatically reduced. The first target was a 12-month waiting time for inpatients. The waiting time is now 13 weeks, which is a dramatic difference. Moreover, there are virtually no people waiting more than 13 weeks, whereas, in the past, the number could be measured in thousands.

Patients can come to harm while on a waiting list, and that is the key point. There is no equity or equality for people who are on waiting lists for months and, in some cases, years, whether they are waiting for orthopaedic treatment or anything else. In those circumstances, patients can come to harm, which is why it is important that we invest to reduce the waiting lists. Having now made an advance, we must hold the line. Having made the extra investment in the past to get us to that point, we must ensure that that investment is not wasted by allowing the situation to slip back.

Mr Easton: I welcome the news that orthopaedic waiting lists have been reduced. To achieve that reduction, we have had to use independent sector providers, whom we fly into the Province, put up in big hotels and pay three or four times the salary of a normal orthopaedic surgeon to perform operations. Although the reduction in waiting lists is welcome, does the Minister not agree that it might be more cost-effective to employ more orthopaedic surgeons to keep the lists at their current low level instead of having to bring in more independent sector providers at an extra cost?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: Perhaps the Member is referring to people who want to be kept to the same standards as

big MPs. Yes, there has been investment. I am not aware of people being paid four times the salary of other surgeons or being put up in big hotels, but I am aware of the dramatic increase in the number of operations. Mr Easton seems to regret that progress and the fact that waiting lists have been reduced.

There has been investment because capacity is a problem. For example, I invested extra money in cardiac surgery because one can come to severe harm while waiting for a heart operation. Using money from the Budget, we have invested in 1,400 operations, an increase on the previous figure of 1,000. Our capacity in the Royal Victoria Hospital is such that it will be another four years before 1,400 operations can be performed there, so we buy the operations outside Northern Ireland. It is matter of patient choice; they can choose where they go to have their operation. The situation is the same for a number of other types of operations.

We either do that or allow the patient to die. I do not think that there is anything equitable or fair in that. Mr Easton may take a jaundiced view of the matter, as he frequently does, that we should allow patients to die rather than invest in that approach. It seems sensible to buy the service at the best cost and provide patients with a choice. Indeed, the chief cardiac surgeon in the Royal Victoria Hospital said that it will take him five years to build capacity. We are now building capacity; that capacity should have been built in the past, but it was not. We are where we are, and we must ensure that our patients are looked after properly and that we do all that we can to ensure that they do not come to harm. However, all that takes resources, and where was Mr Easton when I was arguing for resources?

Mr McCarthy: No Member would want to allow a patient to die under any circumstance.

Are the operations being carried out in Northern Ireland, or are patients being transported to Dublin, Scotland or elsewhere?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: Patients have a choice. They will be told that they can have their operation in the Royal Victoria Hospital, but they might have to wait six months; they can have their operation in London, but they might have to wait four months; or they can have it in Dublin and wait three months, and so on. It depends on the choice of the patient. Where we have capacity, we try to provide a service that does not compromise on patient quality or safety. We invested £35 million in 2007-08, and that must be set against the enormous benefits that many patients have received as a result. As I said in my first answer, patients have not been asked to wait 12 months or more for orthopaedic surgery.

Women and Children's Hospital

6. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the women and children's hospital at the Royal Victoria Hospital. (AQO 2896/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The position has remained the same as I advised previously. Due to funding constraints, the scheme will go forward as two separate hospital projects. Current planning assumptions, which are constrained by the Department's budgetary allocation, mean that site-enabling works are due to start in 2011, with construction of the women's hospital beginning in 2015-16 and completing in 2017-18. Under the current capital profiles, construction of the children's hospital is not anticipated to start until 2017-18, with completion expected in 2021-22.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Minister agree that it is time that OFMDFM and DFP stopped peddling excuses and delivered on re-profiling the investment strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI) so that the new women and children's hospital can be built much sooner than planned? Does he agree that it is high time that the DUP, a second-rate party now in second place, should have second thoughts and come together with their partners —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member knows that a supplementary question must relate to the original question, and he has strayed far from that. I ask the Member to ask a supplementary question on the original question.

Mr B McCrea: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I beg your indulgence. The point is made.

Does the Minister agree that it is high time that we started to deliver for the women and children of the Province and that Ministers must re-profile the ISNI budget so that we can start the work sooner rather than later?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I inherited the ISNI profile. We had a requirement for about £7.8 billion over 10 years for capital investment. Members will be aware of how the Province has been starved of infrastructure. Our allocation was £3.3 billion, and over £700 million has been allocated for the next three years. However, much of that is determined by the profile, which is how much money each Department receives each year, and the profile is determined by whether a Department procures traditionally or through PFI. If it procures through PFI, all the money comes in one year. I have had discussions on that issue with the Department of Finance and Personnel, and I hope to have further discussions with that Department. We need much more flexibility with our profiles. Given the state of the

market in London, for example, PFI is not necessarily the best value for money; therefore, the traditional procurement route is the best way forward.

Two weeks ago, the Western Trust signed a contract under a PFI scheme for the new hospital at Enniskillen, which will provide 1,000 construction jobs in Enniskillen over the next three years. That is a welcome investment, and I am satisfied that it meets value for money. I am also satisfied that we will get the hospital built on time and within budget. However, I would like flexibility for future developments.

Mr McLaughlin: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his update; however, I am alarmed at the protracted timescale. The Minister would enjoy the support of the Chamber if he were to bring forward work on the women and children's hospital.

Will the Minister update the House on his discussions with the Minister of Finance and Personnel about funding for that project?

3.00 pm

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am sure that Mr McLaughlin is well aware that there is a finite Budget and that I was not happy with my Department's share of it. I fought for and won some more money, and, although that was still not enough, it was as good as I was going to get. My Department's share of the Budget must get better in order to allow me to bring forward that project. We need a women and children's hospital; that project is long overdue and should have been started years ago. However, we are where we are; until money comes forward, I cannot further that development profile unless I start to chop other schemes that are just as vital.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Water Charges

1. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister for Regional Development what communications he has had with the Utility Regulator in relation to domestic water charging. (AQO 2911/09)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. My Department and I are in regular communication with the Utility Regulator on a wide range of issues relating to the regulation of the water and sewerage industry, including charging. We communicate regularly through written correspondence, bilateral and stakeholder meetings, informal telephone conversations and e-mail correspondence. We also communicate through formal processes such as the regulator's

approval of NIW's annual charges scheme, the water stakeholders' steering group and the various price control working groups.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Minister for his response. The Minister agreed to submit a paper to the Executive on water charges. Will he inform the House whether that has taken place and what the Executive's response was?

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member is correct that I submitted a paper, but the members of the Executive have yet to discuss it. I do not set the Executive's agenda; I merely request that matters that I want to be raised be put on the agenda. I have yet to secure that matter on the agenda, and I am not sure whether it will be discussed at the next Executive meeting. If it is and a decision is taken, I will inform the Member of the outcome.

Mrs Long: As regards the delay in the introduction of domestic water charges and the subsequent reduction in budgets generally, is the Minister confident that there is enough money in his Department's budget to allow for proper investment in infrastructure, particularly in water and sewerage, over the next number of years?

The Minister for Regional Development: The overall Budget is some £8 billion, so there is enough money to cover the £1 million needed for investment in water and sewerage infrastructure over the next number of years. The question is whether the Executive will decide to pay for that investment, because that will have implications for the money that they have to spend on other areas. They have yet to make that decision; however, I am confident that sufficient finances are available for the work. My Executive colleagues and I must consider what impact that will have on other spending plans.

Mr McLaughlin: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. Has the Minister had any specific communication with the Utility Regulator about the proposal for the further deferment of water charges?

The Minister for Regional Development: As I said, domestic payments beyond 2010-11 remain a matter for the Executive. However, I advised the Utility Regulator that, for the purpose of the price control process for 2010-13, assumptions around the introduction of additional household payments should be removed from NIW's draft business plan until the Executive's policy direction has been established. My officials are working with the Utility Regulator on the detail of that.

Mr O'Loan: I note the Minister's confidence that his budget will be protected despite the deferral of water charges, and I hope that he will act to ensure that that is the case for all Departments. Will he confirm that separate water charges for domestic properties will not be part of his agenda?

The Minister for Regional Development: I must correct the Member: I did not express any confidence that my budget will be protected. I said that an Executive decision along the lines of what I proposed will have implications for all budgets and for the amount of money that the Executive have to spend on public services.

The Executive have been considering the issue of domestic charges since the day and hour that we entered office. We deferred the charges once, and then we decided to defer them again because of the economic circumstances that people, particularly families, face. I have proposed that the Executive continue that deferral for a number of years and reassess the decision in light of the economic circumstances at the conclusion of the deferral period. The Executive must make a decision on that issue, and I look forward to an early discussion and decision.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Foyle Ferry Service

3. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he has taken to ensure the future of the Foyle ferry service. (AQO 2913/09)

20. **Mr Brolly** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry service in relation to security procedures and costs. (AQO 2930/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 20 together.

My Department does not have legislative or direct operational responsibility for the ferry service. However, in the absence of uptake by any other Executive Minister, I have attempted to work with all interested parties to find the solutions that will secure the continued operation of the service.

I am pleased to report that I have secured agreement from the British Transport Minister that the service will no longer be designated as international. That welcome decision should significantly reduce the security costs of approximately £90,000 a year, which had threatened to become an unacceptable burden on the service. I understand that the ferry operator has been notified of that decision, as have Limavady Borough Council and Donegal County Council, which let the contract for the service. Security checks on the service have already been stopped.

In addition, I have encouraged all parties with an interest in the service to play their part in finding solutions to ensuring the long-term viability of the link. To that end, I have held meetings with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster, who has responsibility for tourism, and I have

discussed the possibilities for cross-border funding with the South's Transport Minister Noel Dempsey. I also convened a round-table meeting of stakeholders at the Magilligan terminal on 12 May 2009 to examine possible options.

Now that the security issues have been addressed, the Limavady and Donegal councils should be able to engage with potential service providers with greater clarity. I understand that negotiations on the continuation of the service are still ongoing, and I very much hope that they can be concluded successfully so that that important link for the north-west of Ireland can continue to operate.

Mr Dallat: The Minister may be aware that the 18 employees of the ferry operator are on protective notice and that the current negotiations are subject to particular problems.

Given that Magilligan is no longer classified as an international port, does the Minister agree that it is now nothing more than a river crossing and essentially the same as our other 200-plus road crossings? Furthermore, now that North/South bodies are so important, does he agree that the term "other jurisdiction" is somewhat old-fashioned? Moreover, should he and his counterpart in the South not enter into direct control of this particularly important river crossing? Such action is paramount for the future of tourism in Donegal and the Causeway Coast.

The Minister for Regional Development: I am not sure whether the mouth of the River Foyle could be described as a river crossing. However, I have tried to encourage everyone who has an interest in the service to get involved and to help to find a solution to the problem. For example, the Member will be aware that I have raised the matter at North/South Ministerial Council meetings in an attempt to secure some interest from the Dublin Government's representatives. Although we did not manage to secure any attendance on their part at the round-table meeting, I have noticed that some Donegal members of the Government parties, particularly those from Inishowen, are vociferous about what should be done. However, they have not been able to bring their influence to bear on the Government TDs in the Dáil or get those TDs involved in finding a solution.

I am quite open to legislation in respect of our role and how jurisdictions are described. The key to solving the matter is twofold. First, there was the security issue, which has now been dealt with successfully and which presented not only an additional financial burden but was very off-putting for the service. The second issue is finding a service provider for the ferry service. The Department will continue to encourage those who are negotiating the contracts with whichever provider comes forward. It will also continue to work

with others to find solutions and to gain support for the service.

It is not necessarily the case that there are significant legislative difficulties. The difficulty that I have encountered is a lack of will to get involved from those who argue that the service is important for the north-west but who have not come to the table with very much so far.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I congratulate the Minister on his work on the security issue. Considering that that has obviously been a great encouragement to the ferry operator, perhaps stronger efforts could now be made to bring Leinster House into the equation.

The two councils may be encouraged by the participation of the Department here and of its counterpart in the South, for however long it lasts, given the latest election results. Perhaps four bodies could come together to make up for any potential losses. Will the Minister assure us that we might have such a good summer that subsidies will not be required?

The Minister for Regional Development: Whatever guarantees I can give, I cannot give one on the weather.

Although the issue is not the direct responsibility of my Department, I wish to use my office to encourage those who have an interest in it to row in behind the service, if you will pardon the pun. I consider the service to be important, and it is obvious from the round-table discussions that people in the north-west consider it to be important. I wish to see it continue.

I was disappointed that the Southern Government were not represented at the meeting. On the Donegal side, those who have direct influence with the parties in the Southern Government and with parties who aspire to be in government are interested in the issue. I am willing to explore all options with my counterparts in Dublin and with the councils and interested parties to ensure that the service survives.

Mr Cree: Will the Minister inform the House of the outcome of the more general discussions that he has had with our cross-border colleagues about infrastructure in general and transport in particular? Does he consider the Enterprise service to be sustainable at the current costs?

The Minister for Regional Development: Yes, and all the issues that affect cross-border infrastructure are up for discussion at the regular meetings that we undertake at the North/South Ministerial Council under the transport sector. We have discussed the A5 road, the A8 Belfast to Larne road and some of the smaller connections in the border areas, crossings and bridges.

We also discussed the Enterprise service between Belfast and Dublin, which is an important service. My

Department and the Department of Transport in the South share a strong desire to improve the service as much as possible, to reduce the journey time, to improve its reliability and to improve the comfort and standard of the service. It is the flagship service on the island for railways.

Given the financial restraints that operate here and, particularly, south of the border, some of the ideas that Iarnród Éireann and NIR put forward to us will not be deliverable in the short-to-medium term. However, we are exploring options to improve the reliability of the service with a view to developing further options for improving journey times and the frequency of the service. Both Departments, North and South, desire to improve the Enterprise service, and we must try to find the resources to do so.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 and question 5 have been withdrawn.

A5 Dual Carriageway

6. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the proposed dualling of the A5 from Aughnacloy to Londonderry, and when the preferred route will be announced. (AQO 2916/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Since the last round of public consultation events in February 2009, Roads Service and its advisers have been assessing the route options to inform the decision regarding the alignment of the preferred route. I am pleased to advise that the project is on target to meet its next milestone, which is the announcement of the preferred route, in the summer of 2009.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. Given the tightening of the financial belt in all Departments, will he confirm that his Department's financial commitment to delivering the project is still in place? Is the commitment from the Southern Government still in place? If not, will that have a detrimental impact on the delivery of the project?

The Minister for Regional Development: I confirm that the financial commitment is still in place on our side of the border. At every opportunity at which we have asked the Southern Government and the Minister for Transport, they have confirmed their commitment. Work on the project is ongoing and is on target. Some significant milestones have been reached, and we look forward to reaching the milestone of the selection of the preferred route option in the near future.

Only a few months ago, the Taoiseach, speaking at a CBI dinner in Belfast, reconfirmed his Government's commitment to the project. I assure the Member that, every time we have asked the question, we have been told that the commitment is there. I welcome that

commitment, in view of the difficult financial circumstances the Dublin Government is in. However, at every opportunity, they have confirmed to us that financial commitment, and I assure the Member that Roads Service's commitment is still there too.

3.15 pm

Mr McElduff: I welcome the commitment as restated by the Minister. With regard to route selection, have the Minister's officials given proper hearing to residents in areas like Garvaghy, Newtownsaville, Eskragh and Glencull about their concerns for route selection? What are the next key milestones for the A5 scheme?

The Minister for Regional Development: No stretch of road built through open countryside fails to create a whole range of access issues. Necessarily, the taking of land and significant impacts on farms are involved. In that part of Tyrone, like the countryside where I live, none of the farms is very big. Land issues will have a more significant impact on small farm holdings than on large ones. There will be issues about access for the population right along the route. This is the biggest stretch of road-building ever undertaken on this island. It will have a significant impact. However, there have been public consultations to date, and they have been well attended.

The announcement of the preferred route will come next, and that will alleviate the concerns of people who find that they are not on the preferred route. There will be further discussions with those directly affected by the preferred route corridor. Within that, there is still some room for flexibility, though it is more restricted. Roads Service will then engage in direct consultation with each landowner and property-owner affected. There will be issues of compensation, access and other impacts. It is unthinkable that a project of this scale will not be subject to a public inquiry, so people will also have that opportunity to have their views heard.

There is a well-established process of consulting people and ensuring that they are properly compensated and that their access issues are dealt with. Recently, Roads Service has built some very significant road projects across the North. The Member will be familiar with the Dungannon to Ballygawley project, where some 300 landowners were affected. With some minor exceptions, all the issues between landowners and property-owners and Roads Service were resolved amicably. Those issues can be protracted, and that can be frustrating for Members as it creates a long run-in to the physical road-building project. However, people have rights and entitlements and, where road projects come through their property or land, they are entitled to adequate compensation and consideration of their needs. That takes a long time.

The next key milestones for the scheme are the publication of draft statutory orders associated with the

environmental statement, direction order and vesting order in late 2010. It is likely to lead to the holding of a public inquiry in 2011.

Mr K Robinson: I have listened with interest to the exchanges between the Minister and the Member for west of the Bann. I have noted that there are two major road schemes west of the Bann and that the Member has concerns about a major road scheme west of the Bann. Can I bring a bit of balance to the debate? Is the A8, the trans-European network route —

Mr Speaker: Order. As I have said, the supplementary question must relate to the original question. The Member is straying far outside the ambit of the original question.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's reassurance that he is satisfied with the Irish Government's commitment to the project.

Given the Irish Government's current instability, can the Minister assure the House that the item will be kept constantly on the agenda of the North/South Ministerial Council's transport sector so that it knows that the Assembly is serious about its commitment to the project?

The Minister for Regional Development: I assure the Member that not only has the matter been on the agenda of every meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council's transport sector but it has been discussed in every plenary session of the entire body of Ministers from the Administrations, North and South.

It is a key project for the island. It is a key project for the Irish Government as well as for the Government in the North. As I said in my response to Mr Buchanan's question, any time that we have asked, that commitment has been reaffirmed. I am sure that the matter will continue to feature in discussion at sectoral meetings on North/South matters and in plenary sessions.

Mr Speaker: Question 7 has been withdrawn.

Andersonstown Gateway

8. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the Andersonstown gateway study and how his Department views the study in the context of other development plans for west Belfast, since they relate to roads, water and sewerage infrastructure and public transportation. (AQO 2918/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: A number of the proposals in the study report are not included in any of my Department's programmes. Other references to schemes, including improvements to public transport and potential for park-and-ride facilities, are detailed in my Department's Belfast metropolitan transport plan (BMTP). There are

development plans for west Belfast. It is important that a cohesive approach to the way forward be taken. My Department will want to contribute to the regeneration plans and expects to be consulted formally to enable us to provide input and assessment of the proposals.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle agus a Aire. I have taken on board what the Minister said about consultation, which, on those issues, is important. Will he tell the House what consultation took place before the publication of the study?

The Minister for Regional Development: In July 2008, DSD approached DRD for a representative to attend the project steering group, which was set up to oversee the Andersonstown gateway feasibility study. It was agreed that DRD would attend the group on an agenda-specific basis and would receive copies of the steering group's minutes. No transport-specific agenda items required its attendance. On 17 November 2008, a bilateral meeting took place with DSD and the consultant who conducted the study to discuss the Andersonstown rapid transit route. Since that meeting, DSD has not requested any further input.

I agree with the Member's contention that one advantage — I am sure that many can be listed — of the return of devolved Government is the ability of Ministers to act together to ensure that we take a joined-up approach to government. Any substantial regeneration plans that are under discussion will, inevitably, impact on a range of Departments. It is vital that there be ongoing and proper consultation among those Departments to ensure that all our plans have a degree of harmony and that we do not engage in exercises that present a set of plans that contradict those of another Department.

Mr Speaker: Mr Elliott is not in his place to ask question 9. Question 10 has been withdrawn.

Crystal Alliance

11. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister for Regional Development how much has been paid to Crystal Alliance in the past two years. (AQO 2921/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has advised me that £27 million has been paid to Steria Ltd, which is the prime contractor for Crystal Alliance, in the past two financial years, 2007-08 and 2008-09. The range of services that Crystal Alliance has provided under Steria includes customer contracts and services, non-domestic billing and the provision of a mobile work-management system.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Minister consider that to be a good use of public money? Could that money have been spent on more pressing matters?

The Minister for Regional Development: That particular contract was inherited as part of direct rule plans. Obviously, I initiated a review of all of that by the Independent Water Review Panel. The panel returned a series of recommendations. The Executive took the decision to defer domestic charges again. I have put a further proposition to the Executive on the matter. If the Executive take a decision in that regard, which leads us some distance into the future, we can look closely at the apparatus of what was created as NIW under direct rule propositions. Until such times as the Executive take a clear decision that allows some distance to look to the future, it is difficult to take decisions about the apparatus that surrounds NIW. I am happy to do that. Depending on the Executive's decision, a range of matters will flow, one of which will be about the structures of the company.

Mr Speaker: Question 12 has been withdrawn.

Traffic Calming

13. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he plans to introduce a scheme for small-scale traffic-calming projects, so that areas that do not meet the criteria for traffic calming can obtain measures that will make the areas safer.

AQO 2923/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: At this rate, I might reach question 20.

Roads Service uses established criteria to determine and prioritise locations for the provision of all traffic-calming measures. The assessment procedure considers various factors in order to prioritise the many requests that it receives. Such factors include personal injury statistics; the volume and speed of vehicles on the road; environmental factors, such as the presence of schools, playgrounds, hospitals, clinics, shops and public buildings; and whether the road is used as a through route.

The ultimate dependent factor for schemes is the availability of funding. Given that the demand for road safety measures exceeds Roads Service's capacity to deliver such schemes, the predetermined criteria enable the establishment of a priority list of traffic-calming schemes. That list helps to ensure that our limited resources are directed to the areas of greatest need; that value for money is obtained; that no discrimination is made between areas, for example, council areas and towns; and that equality issues are managed. Therefore, there are no plans to introduce a scheme for small-scale traffic-calming projects.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas don Aire as an fhreagra sin. Will the Minister and the Department consider schemes that cost less than £5,000 at any time in the future?

The Minister for Regional Development: As I said, the difficulty is that the demand for traffic-calming schemes far exceeds Roads Service's ability and resource capacity to supply them. It has established criteria that it will weigh to establish which areas are most in need and where traffic dangers exist.

Other Members and other parties have argued for wholesale traffic calming in every built-up area. Such a measure would have substantial implications for Roads Service's budget and the Executive's Budget. The established criteria allow Roads Service to deal with priority cases by establishing a weighing mechanism that will ensure that such cases are dealt with as quickly as possible. The number of cases that can be undertaken in one year depends on the resources. If the demand still exceeds the ability to supply, it is difficult to introduce new criteria.

Mr Newton: The Minister is aware of the demand, particularly from schools in built-up areas, for traffic calming in their immediate vicinities. Traffic calming exists to remove dangers and enhance safety. Therefore, although a full-scale programme of traffic calming in an area may not be necessary, traffic-calming measures may be required in the immediate vicinity of a school where large numbers of pupils gather.

The Minister for Regional Development: That is essentially how traffic-calming criteria are used. As I said, the criteria take into account all those factors, such as whether a road is a through road, as that implies a greater volume and speed of traffic, and the facilities on the road. Although the Member is particularly interested in urban areas in his own constituency, the Department has piloted a couple of schemes for temporary 20 mph zones outside schools in rural areas. That is a safety feature for schools when pupils go to school in the morning or leave in the afternoon. Early indications show that the pilot appears to be successful, and I anticipate that the scheme will be rolled out across the region. The conditions that the Member describes, such as the number of schools in an area and the volume and speed of traffic, are part of the criteria that are used to assess the need for traffic calming.

Mrs Long: In many areas, although the priority for traffic calming is high, some residents — often a small number — object to such proposals. If those objections cannot be overcome, when would Roads Service decide to override them? In what circumstances would it decide to abandon the scheme? That is a contentious issue.

3.30 pm

The Minister for Regional Development: It is hard to apply an overall rule in those situations, because every circumstance is different. People are increasingly objecting to traffic humps, in particular. Sometimes they can cause greater noise outside someone's door. People will argue that they cause a blight through

noise pollution or traffic slowing down and changing gear outside their property. Although there is a strong desire for traffic calming and for a safer environment for pedestrians and schoolkids, objections are sometimes raised to the nature of those calming measures. Roads Service has to take those objections seriously and, in each circumstance, tries to deal with them as reasonably as possible to secure the overall aim of a traffic-calming project.

In some cases, Roads Service will amend the project to try to deal with objections. It is hard to say where to draw a line beyond which they will say yes, because each circumstance is different. Roads Service will deal with each situation as sensibly as it can, but there will come a time when certain individuals cannot be satisfied and, at that stage, Roads Service has to decide whether to go ahead. It is a much better circumstance if everyone involved can agree, otherwise the process can be delayed or can end up in court, which would lead to greater public resources having to be expended on a particular traffic-calming scheme. I am afraid that there is no fixed template for dealing with those situations, because each set of circumstances is different.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Decline in Bee Population

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes with concern the decline in the bee population in Northern Ireland and the potential impact this trend may have on agriculture, the environment, and the wider economy; further notes the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' investment in research into bee population decline in England and the publication of a bee health strategy for England; and calls on the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development to invest in local research into bee health and to publish a bee health strategy. — [*Mr Cree.*]

Mr Shannon: I support the motion and congratulate Mr Cree for proposing it. A country boy like me is well aware of the issues and the changes. However, urban dwellers should also be aware of those issues. I recall that, when I was a young boy taking my holidays in Strabane and Clady, my aunt Isobel kept honeybees. I was aware then that the ecosystem in the countryside was clearly balanced, and that honeybees and bumblebees played a crucial role.

There are 18 true species of bumblebee in the UK, many of which are threatened by habitat loss and other changes in the countryside. Six species remain relatively common, while others have declined to varying degrees. Those who are into bees, as I know some Members are, will be aware of two species, the great yellow bumblebee and the shrill carder bee, which are of particular concern, because their populations have been almost completely decimated.

Bees are the major pollinators of most of our wild flowers, and if they continue to disappear, those plants will set less seed, resulting in sweeping changes to the countryside, which may come to be dominated by a different range of plants. Our countryside could lose its colour if rare plants disappear. That is a fact; it is not made up. There is evidence that that process is already under way, and that is why the motion is so important. Those changes will have catastrophic knock-on effects on the wildlife that depends on those plants.

At home, we always try to set aside and maintain habitat land for birds, flora and bees. Bumblebees are of enormous commercial importance. Many arable and horticultural crops depend on bumblebees for pollination to varying degrees. Oilseed rape can set adequate seed without bumblebees, provided there are sufficient honeybees, but other crops, such as broad, field and runner beans and soft fruit, depend on them. It is clear that bees have a crucial part to play in the countryside, not just for honey production, but for the balance that they help to maintain.

The total value of Europe's insect pollinators is estimated at some €14·2 billion. That cannot be ignored. Crop yields are already falling in parts of the

countryside; it is essential that we conserve our remaining bumblebee populations, and, if possible, restore them to their past abundance. That cannot be achieved with existing nature reserves.

It is very important that we understand how the bumblebee and honeybee work. To support a healthy population, large tracts of land must be managed sympathetically, and UK nature reserves are too small in isolation to help as they should. Bumblebees, along with wild and managed honeybees, are suffering after a very poor summer last year. Honeybees have also fallen prey to a certain mite, and the parasites have decimated some of the honeybee population.

Across the pond in the United States, there has been a collapse in the number of bumblebees and honeybees; some bee-keepers have lost up to 90% of their population. The bee population has fallen by 30% in other parts. That shows that there is an issue, not just for Northern Ireland, but for the whole of the world.

We are asking the Minister to invest in our farmers and encourage them to adopt appropriate agricultural and environmental schemes to support the replanting of hedgerows. We need to recreate the hay meadows and flower-rich grasslands and use wild flowers and traditional cottage garden plants in gardens nationwide. I believe that the Minister has a role to play, and I ask her to put support systems in motion.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Shannon: Bumblebees and honeybees should be restored to the countryside.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the proposer for bringing the motion to the Assembly. It is a very important issue, and I declare an interest as a bee-keeper, on a very small scale, in County Armagh.

The bee population is very important to the development of crops. In County Armagh and in south and east Tyrone particularly, Bramleys, and apples in general, would fail completely if it were not for pollination by bees. Many orchard keepers use bee colonies to help with that pollination. Bees play a very important role in the entire infrastructure.

If the decline in numbers that has happened over the past few years continues, the bee population could be wiped out completely. There are many questions to be asked about why the decline has happened. Despite an increase in imports of bee colonies into the North, the population has declined by roughly 50%. That is dramatic, and we have to ask whether some of the diseases are being imported with the new bee colonies.

I ask the Minister to tell us what protection exists to ensure the proper inspection of imported bee colonies to try to keep disease out. We share a land boundary

with the South of Ireland, but bees do not recognise borders: they fly, and can come here very easily. What effect has that had?

I find it strange to be standing here in Stormont and supporting the bee men for the first time. It is very important to recognise the role of Government in trying to alleviate the risk of importing disease. What links are there with the Southern Government to try to deal with the problem that they have? What can be done to ensure an increase in the population of queen bees and bees that have been native to Ireland over the years? We should be trying to increase those rare breeds of bees that are found particularly in County Cork and County Kerry.

A lot of pesticide is used. Besides sprays, there are various ways of protecting crops, such as wheat and barley, and orchards in which the bees are working. One must ask what effect GM crops have, particularly in countries such as the United States, where there has been a massive decline in the bee population. We must also examine the contribution that pesticides make to other problems that affect the native bee population.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for giving way. The issue of GM crops is very delicate. Does the Member agree that the introduction of anything that is alien to the countryside upsets the ecosystem and the balance of the countryside and, therefore, contributes to the problem that we have with the bee population?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr Molloy: I agree with the Member; once people start to alter the infrastructure of the countryside, of which bees are an important element, there will be problems. One can also question the new technologies that are being used, such as those that use airwaves, and the effect that they have on bees' homing systems. Bee-keepers often find that entire swarms have been wiped out or have not returned to their hives; there is a sense that the swarms have lost their direction and have not been able to get back to their hives. In some cases, new swarms go into empty hives and build their own populations. Where have those swarms come from, and what infections or diseases do they bring with them?

The big issue is to ask what the Department can do, despite all the problems, to protect the bees, support the farmers who keep bees, and to encourage the growth of the bee population. We must ensure that we try to encourage the growth and rebuilding of colonies that have been wiped out by disease or its effects. That is crucial if we are to maintain the ecosystem and help the environment.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has published its report and sent it out for consultation, and the feedback from that will

start to indicate what can be done locally. It is also important to create links at a North/South ministerial level to tie together the two parts of Ireland so that there is a structure that helps to develop the bee population by stopping its decline and increasing its number. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Burns: I support the motion, and I thank Mr Cree and Mr Elliott for tabling it.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak on the issue. I have a great personal interest in the subject, because my father was a bee-keeper. In fact, at one time, he was president of the Ulster Beekeepers' Association. My brother also has bees and is a member of the Randalstown and District Beekeepers' Association.

Like many other Members, I have received lots of letters and e-mails from various bee-keepers and interested organisations recently, most of which say that the situation is going from bad to worse. That is very worrying, because we know how important bees are to the agriculture industry and the natural environment. The true economic value of bees is much greater than their value as honey and wax producers. As other Members said, without bees, we would have reduced levels of crops, such as apples, pears, strawberries and raspberries. Bees are essential, because they pollinate those crops.

We need such local produce on our supermarkets' shelves, so it is vital that we maintain a healthy population of bumblebees and honeybees. Members will know that honeybees live in managed colonies and hibernate over the winter. In contrast, in the bumblebee population, only the queen bee hibernates over the winter and builds a new colony each year from scratch. It is important to have a strong hive of honeybees that are ready to go out and pollinate in the spring, because it takes much longer for bumblebees to increase in number and go out and pollinate. The bumblebee does not really come into action until much later in the very late spring or early summer.

3.45 pm

Colony collapse disorder and the shrinking bee population is a complex issue. The Minister said in most of her correspondence that the decline in bee numbers is down to recent cold weather. One cannot argue with that, but it is not the only factor. One cannot produce bees and honey with summers such as we have had in the past two years; that is nearly impossible. We need good, hot weather for honey production. However, in light of the decline in the bee population worldwide, it is hard to accept that bad weather is the only reason or that it is temporary. There is more to it than that. We need to find out what the problem is locally and why the decline is happening.

There has been a great deal of speculation and research worldwide on various theories. That research

identified a number of factors that are reducing the number of honeybees, and other Members spoke about that. In particular, there is general agreement that the misuse and over-use of pesticides is weakening bees' immune systems, leaving them too weak to fight off diseases such as varroa. However, without more research we will not know for sure what is happening locally, and why.

The motion calls on the Minister to invest in research and to publish a bee health strategy; I entirely agree with that. Some good work has been done in England and Wales, and DEFRA has committed a great deal of extra money for research. About £10 million is available to study the problem in England and Wales.

We have also seen the creation of a national bee unit and a national bee database and an increased partnership approach between bee-keepers and government. Those actions have been warmly welcomed by the British Beekeepers' Association. However, we have not seen such decisive action locally, and, from the correspondence that I have received, certain local bee-keepers are not happy with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Burns: They want more funding, and we need to get in place a plan that sets out a strategy for the next 10 years.

Mrs Long: A number of Members made clear their country credentials. I come to the debate as a city slicker, and make no apologies for it.

The honeybee population is hugely important for agriculture, the wider economy and, more importantly than we perhaps recognise, for the environment. It is easy for those of us who live in the city to become detached from the environment, and it is important that we are aware of how fragile the environment is.

Honeybees contribute directly to local food production through honey but also indirectly through crop pollination, and people often do not recognise the significance of that to the economy. That should not be underestimated, because the honey industry is worth between £10 million and £30 million a year. In addition, bee-keeping is worth about £165 million to crop production. Bees have, therefore, a major impact on the economy and on agriculture.

Honeybees also play a critical role in maintaining the fragile balance of biodiversity in protecting the natural environment. The factors that have been blamed for causing a decrease in the bee population such as very wet summers and warmer winters can also affect other pollinators, which could have a significant knock-on effect for the natural environment.

Some Members said that the causes of the decline in the bee population are much contested, and there are many and varied suggestions. Members mentioned pests, and they spoke about pesticides that are picked up when bees are pollinating crops. There is also a debate about whether genetic narrowing of the species, as people breed species that are less aggressive but better honey producers, can lead to species that are more susceptible to disease. That is a consideration.

Equally, importing bees to supplement the local population creates biosecurity issues. Therefore, several factors need to be considered.

Another aspect is loss of habitat, and people in the city can see that happening quite quickly. There has been a rapid decline in open spaces, hedgerows and the wildflower population in the surrounding countryside. As cities and towns expand, we lose nutritional balance and habitat. I have already referred to the weather, and perhaps that is another impact of climate change that has not been fully considered.

Given all the competing factors, it is important that good qualitative research is undertaken. We need an evidence base as we bring forward proposals on how to address the problem. However, it is not just a local problem. Colony collapse disorder has decimated the bee industry in the USA. DEFRA has said that the situation is not yet as serious in the UK, but we need to be aware that there have been dramatic decreases in the bee population.

The 'Honeybee Regional Report for Northern Ireland 2008' indicates a notable drop in the bee population. There is debate about whether that was caused by weather conditions in the previous year, and, if it was, the situation could be replicated this year. There is a significant issue that needs to be addressed. DEFRA has brought forward its bee plan, to which it has allocated resources; it will take different measures to examine the issue of pests, promote good bee-keeping standards and deal with biosecurity issues as we try to supplement the population.

People have mentioned that, locally, the Minister and the Department have been considering the matter. The Minister and the Department have committed to move on a bee health strategy following the finalisation of the DEFRA report. I add my party's support to the calls that have been made in the Chamber for that to be done quickly. The dangers of a continued decimation of the bee population have not been fully contemplated. It does not affect only the countryside; it affects the survival of all of us.

Lord Browne: I support the motion. As an urban dweller, I cannot pretend to be an expert on the matter. However, as a qualified zoologist, I have studied the life of sandhoppers and the sex life of bees. Therefore,

I fully appreciate the important role that they play in agriculture.

There is no doubt that all the scientific evidence indicates that the honeybee is under threat. The question is how that should be dealt with, particularly in Northern Ireland, where the honeybee is vital to the economy. We have heard that colonies have been utterly devastated by many diseases, particularly from varroa, protozoan, viruses and bacteria. Up to one third of our food crops require pollination, and bees are probably the nation's main pollinators. Crops, trees, apples, raspberries, pears and legumes all need to be pollinated.

The failure of the pollination cycle is estimated to have cost many hundreds of millions of pounds throughout the United Kingdom. Indeed, in Northern Ireland, the apple industry alone is worth millions of pounds each year. What is required to address the serious situation? Something needs to be done quickly. Money can be devoted to research, but it will be a long time before that research yields an outcome. We must also question whether the allocation of more money to research is a cost-effective approach.

The United Kingdom Government have already made welcome progress towards funding the research that is necessary to modify bee-keeping and thus arrest the dramatic loss of bees and colonies. They have announced that many millions of pounds will be spent on research for pollinators such as bees, butterflies and other insects. That funding was not exclusive to DEFRA; it included various agencies and the Scottish Government, which have taken a lead role. Therefore, I will be grateful if the Minister will assure us that money will be forthcoming to fund similar research programmes in Northern Ireland that will help to stop the decline of the bee colonies.

As I said, bees are very important to the apple industry here, which is a multi-million pound EU industry under threat. Research will take time, but one third of Ireland's bee species is in serious decline and the apple industry here relies on them, so we need to show the same urgency here as is being shown in England and Scotland. Has the Minister had talks with her Scottish counterparts to find out how Scotland is tackling the problem and how we could work together and share vital information to speed up an outcome?

It is vital that an integrated approach is adopted so that research can be carried out. We do not really know why the bee population has declined. There are many factors, but no simple answer; it could be due to new farming practices. We know that wheat and barley fields have fewer weeds due to the use of insecticides and that the use of clover has decreased. I ask the Minister whether there is co-operation between, for example, the Planning Service and the Department of

Agriculture to encourage the planting of trees, the growing of clover and the control of insecticides. A co-ordinated policy is required.

Another aspect that should be examined is the restriction of the movement of bees for breeding purposes. Has that been considered? It is vital that we have an integrated pest and hive management strategy along with money for research. I do not know if we have bee inspectors in Northern Ireland: if we do, how many are there, how are they trained, and what reports do they produce? If we do have bee inspectors, it is important that they have appropriate training. There are many bee-keepers here and they need to be trained in good practice. I support the motion.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I too thank the Members who brought the issue to the Floor of the House. I support the motion and, like Mr Molloy, I never thought that I would be standing in Stormont supporting the bee men, but there you go.

On a serious note, Albert Einstein once speculated that if the bee were to disappear from the surface of the globe then humans would only have four years of life left. Scientists have said that that is a myth: it may be, but it is food for thought.

What are the honeybees trying to tell us? Are they warning us to be more conscious of our environment and manage our use of pesticides, particularly insecticides, more appropriately? As has been said, one third of the food produced is due to the work of honeybees serving as vital pollinators, yet food creation may be severely impacted by colony collapse disorder. The registered bee population on these islands has shrunk by between 10% and 15%, but the real reduction may be much greater.

There are fears that a Europe-wide shortage of bees could affect crop pollination and food production. As Mr Molloy outlined earlier, in America, many esteemed scientists believe that exposure to genetically engineered crops and their plant-produced pesticides merit serious deliberation as the cause or factor in the development and spread of colony collapse disorder. Two of the threats most commonly blamed for weakening bee colonies are insecticides and the deadly varroa mite. The trend of higher than normal rates of death dates back to 2002.

Pesticides and herbicides used in farming and on lawns can weaken bees. I understand that pesticides used on plants do not kill bees but hamper their sense of direction and leave them unable to find their way back to their hives. Many factors could be working together. It could be a combination of bad weather, as some Members said, chemicals, parasites, viruses, microwaves coming from mobile phone masts, handsets

or satellite equipment. Various factors could be responsible for the decline.

4.00 pm

Albert Einstein said that no bees would result in there being no people. One third of European food crops rely on bees for pollination, as do some 250 species of flowering plants, many of which are crucial to world agriculture. Bees increase the yields of approximately 90 crops, such as apples, blueberries, cucumbers and raspberries by as much as 30%. Without bees, many fruits and vegetables would become scarce and expensive. In addition, many conventional medicines and alternative remedies come from flowering plants, and cotton is another essential product that is pollinated by the bee.

However, not only humans but birds and small mammals that feed on the berries and seeds that rely on bee pollination would suffer. An increased knowledge is required of how the problem affects insects such as bees, wasps and butterflies, and particularly whether it is due to climate change, because bumblebees, honeybees and other pollinators are important to Ireland's economy.

Is nature giving us a wake-up call on how precious are our habitats? Is the decline in the bee population the sting in the tail because we have disregarded the environment? To halt the recent decline requires the immediate improvement of habitats, and everyone can play a part in that. Gardeners, farmers and councils can help, and as a Member opposite said, schools and community groups can develop wild flower gardens. Indigenous bees must be protected from diseases that may be carried by imported bees, and work must be carried out on an all-island strategy for bee health.

In conclusion, there are many areas of ambiguity, but it is clear that there must be a greater focus on sustainable living, which has implications for intense farming practices. The shift to organic farming must continue. A bee strategy must be developed, and more all-island research must be carried out on the decline of the bee population. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P J Bradley: The disappearance of the honeybee yet again poses the question of which Minister should take the lead: is it an agricultural, environmental or health issue?

Someone once said that if bees were to disappear, humans would survive for only a few years. Some people argue that none other than Albert Einstein made that comment, a view endorsed earlier by Mr Cree and Mr Clarke. Regardless of who said that, it cannot be denied that bees are important to humanity's survival. Approximately 90% of plants in the world are known to rely on pollination for fertilisation and reproduction. Honeybees pollinate more than one third of the food

that we eat. They also pollinate cotton, and it is hard to imagine a world without that.

In early May, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development visited the apple country of Loughgall during the Bramley celebrations. Members learned about the important role played by the honeybee in the production of the apple crop, and we heard the management's concerns about the late arrival of the bee in 2009. I discovered that 80% of fruit-producing plants, including apples, depend on bee pollination.

Many scientists throughout the world are endeavouring to address the problem of the disappearing honeybee, but none has yet come up with an answer to its decline. Some suggest that the extensive use of pesticides is to blame. If that is proven to be correct, the finger must not be pointed solely at the farmer. Those of us who treat our lawns or flower beds with cosmetic pesticides, or whatever fancy name they are given by the producers of pesticides or herbicides, are equally to blame.

The disappearance of the honeybee, or, to describe the mystery properly, colony collapse disorder, happens when bees leave the hive and simply fail to return. Some scientists are working on the theory that radiation from mobile phones, as mentioned by other Members, and high-tension pylons disrupt a bee's inbuilt navigation system, thus disrupting its ability to find its way back to the hive. Others believe that global warming may somehow be responsible. Regardless of whether mobile phones, bad weather, global warming or pesticides are to blame, the seriousness of the issue should not be underestimated.

Just over a decade ago, the expected annual mortality rate of bees was in the region of 5%. Today, however, that figure has rocketed frighteningly to between 30% and 35%. In Ireland, almost 30% of the bee population has disappeared, and in 2008 alone, the decline in America was between 30% and 40%.

It should be recognised that no amount of human activity, however well intended, could replace the exclusive work of the honeybee.

I welcome and support the motion. I have considered what should be the final lines of my contribution to the debate. I suggest that the worldwide wealth of knowledge be pooled immediately. Only good can come from an exercise that involves expertise. If a method, or methods, can be arrived at that will enhance the recovery of pollination by bees, it will benefit bees, bee-keepers, farmers and humanity.

I suggest to our Minister of Agriculture that the provision of stock and bee-keeping material should be included in the list of items that the Department is drawing up that are eligible for support under the farm modernisation programme.

Finally, I call on the Minister of Agriculture, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Minister of the Environment to embark on a North/South programme to tackle the threat that colony collapse disorder, if allowed to continue, will bring to the island of Ireland. I thank the Members who tabled the motion and hope that the seriousness of the issue will ensure that it receives prompt attention. As Mr Cree said in proposing the motion, there is no longer room for complacency.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Elliott and Mr Cree for tabling the motion and for bringing this very important issue to the Assembly for debate. I expected a number of cheap jibes about the birds and the bees, but I did not expect the DUP to bring sex into it. However, I was interested to hear what Members have said, and I hope that the debate will add to the public profile of the bee.

The bee is one of the most vital and valuable insects on the planet, and I agree wholeheartedly with what has been said in the Chamber today. The bee plays a significant role in agriculture; it is a key part of many ecosystems that support our natural environment; and as we heard, the bee makes a very real contribution to the economy. Therefore, each of us is responsible for ensuring the preservation of our local bees. As the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, I am happy to respond to the debate, because I recognise its importance in my portfolio.

Before I discuss in detail the issues raised, I will highlight my keen, personal involvement in the bee sector. In March, I had the honour of opening the Ulster Beekeepers' Association's annual conference, at which I gave the welcome address on behalf of the industry. Last September, I was also pleased to give the opening speech at the international EurBee3 conference, which bee scientists from around the world attended and Queen's University hosted. I have heard at first hand the priorities and concerns of our bee-keepers and other stakeholders, and I will continue to work closely with the industry to maintain and improve the sustainability and status of bee-keeping here.

The recent decline in the number of bees here has been raised by Members as an issue that must be properly understood in the context of a beehive's annual cycle, which involves a completely natural loss of bees as the hive slows its activities over winter. The queen temporarily stops replacing bees, and pollen and nectar collection are suspended, with the hive surviving on its honey stores. In a strong and healthy hive, the number of bees will decrease from more than 40,000 to fewer than 10,000 individuals. Weaker hives may not survive the winter, and for that very reason, bee-keepers expect to lose a proportion of their bees

every year. Bee numbers will rise again naturally in May or June and lost hives can then be replaced.

At present, an estimated 1,000 bee-keepers maintain about 4,000 hives in the North, and over-winter losses of between 10% and 20% are considered normal. At the Ulster Beekeepers' Association conference in March, I announced an AFBI-led survey of our bee-keeping industry. The preliminary results from that survey show over-winter losses here of approximately 22%. This year's losses are at the upper end of the usual over-winter drop. However, almost 50% of bee-keepers surveyed here reported no losses. Bee-keepers who lost hives attributed those losses mainly to problems with queen bees or to hives starving from there being insufficient honey stores. Only 9% of bee-keepers attributed any losses this year to disease.

Members have mentioned that the main disease responsible for increasing over-winter losses is caused by the varroa mite. The disease was first introduced to Ireland in 1998 and is now endemic across much of these islands. There is no evidence that the disease known as colony collapse disorder, or CCD, is present in Britain or Ireland. However, we will not be complacent, and my officials will closely watch events in other parts of the world.

I previously made a statement in the Assembly to that effect. As part of their normal activities, bee-keepers manage the effects of the weather and varroa mites on their hives, and they will replace weak or lost hives when bee numbers increase again this year.

Recent DEFRA research concluded that importing bees and bee products generates the greatest risk to the health of bees here, and many Members mentioned that fact. However, a ban on the importation of queen, or other, bees without justification would breach EU free-trade principles. In the same way that I cannot enforce a ban on bringing in heifers from bluetongue-infected areas, at this time, it is not in my gift to ban the importation of queen bees. However, at the most recent NSMC meeting, I discussed the matter with my ministerial counterpart in the South, Brendan Smith. I have not yet spoken to colleagues in Scotland, although I will. I would, however, like to see the industry implement a self-imposed ban, which I believe would be more useful and worthwhile.

Like other Members, I believe that our indigenous bee strains are probably better suited to our environment and weather conditions, and if that genetic strain is diluted, the bees here might not have the same resistance to some of the problems that are being encountered in other places.

In order to minimise the risk and impact of disease, my Department and AFBI supports the bee-keeping sector through inspection and advice services. For example, we have three bee inspectors, and a further

two are being trained. Furthermore, we run bee-keeping courses, conduct the bee health survey, which is ongoing, and analyse bee samples that are submitted by bee-keepers.

A significant reduction in bee numbers would have an impact on agriculture, the environment and the economy. The production of the world-renowned Bramley apple is the core industry here that depends heavily on insect pollination. Like P J Bradley, I was at the Bramley apple festival in Loughgall this year, so I recognise the importance of bees to apple pollination. However, there are several other crops — such as strawberries and protein crops — that rely to a lesser extent on insect pollination.

Leslie Cree, Thomas Burns and Willie Clarke talked about the use of pesticides, and the Pesticides Safety Directorate's code of practice for using plant-protection products contains specific guidance for the protection of bees. Individual plant-protection products with the potential to harm bees are labelled appropriately. Nevertheless, there is recognition that pesticides can have an impact on bee health and the bee population.

Leslie Cree and Francie Molloy laboured the point that bees are the main source of insect pollination and the first step in the flowering and fruiting process. Without bees, we would be missing a crucial factor in the apple-growing cycle, and that would have a negative impact on Bramley yields. The same is true for several other crops, and that is why bees are invaluable to environmentally stable farming.

Aside from the agriculture context, through visiting wild flowers in our environment, bees are one of the keystones of most of the ecosystems on this island. All ecosystems are based on plants, and most flowering plants that require insect pollination are dependent on bees. As pollinators, bees ensure that fruit is produced for the benefit of wildlife on trees, wild shrubs and flowers. Therefore, if bees were removed from that equation, a vital link in plant production would be missing and the countryside around us, which is now so full of flowering plants, would quickly change for the worse. Furthermore, through pollination, bees support environmental biodiversity.

Naomi Long talked about the importance of bees for the city environment. People are known to have hives on rooftop gardens, and as long as there are plants to provide pollen, bees can thrive in a city environment. Therefore, we can all do our bit to ensure the survival of the species.

As many Members pointed out, bees also contribute, directly and indirectly, to the economy. The total revenue here from honey, hive products and pollination fees is approximately £220,000 per annum. Pollination, mainly of the apple crop, by bees is estimated to be worth at least £6 million, and that figure does not take

account of the important environmental value of bees in the countryside.

4.15 pm

My Department recognises the importance of bees in that regard through its agrienvironment schemes — a point made by Jim Shannon. The new countryside management scheme includes a specific measure involving a pollen and nectar mixture that contains a mix of legumes flowering at different times to provide a continuous supply of pollen and nectar bees and other pollinators. In 2007 alone, under agrienvironment schemes, my Department helped to widen the bee environment here through the restoration of 570 kilometres of hedgerow field boundaries; the sowing of 360 hectares of conservation cereals; the planting of 1,700 hectares of wild bird cover, 70 hectares of traditional orchards and 620 hectares of other trees; and the maintenance of approximately 350 hectares of rough grass margins.

We are doing that as part of the countryside management scheme. However, it is not just our responsibility. I would be happy to talk to any Members who want further information about the pollen and nectar mixture for — as Willie Clarke said — councils, schools or our own gardens. We want to see more flowering plants enabling pollination and sustaining our bee population. I am very keen that we all be in a position to do our bit.

Moving onto DEFRA's investment in research and its bee health strategy, £10 million has been made available for research in respect of insect pollinators, which includes bees as well as butterflies and moths. That funding will be made available to research teams here, and I encourage local research organisations to avail themselves of it, not least because of the particular expertise that they can bring on areas such as the apple crop. Indeed, Mr Wallace Browne made the point about research ability and the money that is available. It is worth stressing that the results of that research will benefit us all and inform our strategic direction on bee health for the future.

The strategy launched by DEFRA earlier this year aims to keep pests and diseases to a minimum, promote good standards of husbandry, encourage effective biosecurity and ensure that sound science underpins bee health policy and its implementation. Those are likely issues that we will consider in the development of our strategy.

In respect of the motion's call on me to invest in local research and to publish a strategy, I can confirm that in addition to the support being provided to the sector, my Department has begun work on the development of an appropriate local bee health strategy. I have made a commitment to the industry that a relevant, challenging strategy will be developed for the

good of bee-keeping, agriculture and the wider environment here. Given the island dimension, my officials will be engaging with colleagues in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the course of developing our bee health strategy. That will ensure that all-island co-operation is maximised between North and South.

As mentioned previously, a contingency plan for bee health is already in the final stages of drafting, and, once complete, it will lay the groundwork to securing and preserving the high standard of bee health that we have here already. The bee health strategy will seek to build on that, encompassing appropriate research and development budgetary considerations, subject to affordability and value for money.

Members should be under no illusions: I am committed to supporting the industry. My Department has been hard at work supporting the sector, and I will continue to work for a future where bees, and the industries and ecosystems that depend on them, continue to thrive. However, it is clear that positive action on that front should not be limited to me and my Department; we must all play our part in creating an environment that supports the bee in its crucial role.

I hope that the support measures and future plans that I have raised in my response have given Members an indication of the positive steps that I have taken to prevent a decline in the number of bees here and the consequences that that could have for agriculture, the environment and the wider economy. I would welcome the continued support and interest of Members for my strategy to promote bee health, because, as we have heard, healthy bees should be a concern for each and every one of us. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

Mr Savage: I wish to declare an interest as a farmer.

I share my colleagues' concerns about the decline of the bee population in Northern Ireland. Over the past year, one in three bee colonies has vanished. Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK not to have a bee health strategy. In light of the significance of the bee to our environment, food production and economy, it is of utmost importance that Northern Ireland is not left behind. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development made a commitment to produce a bee health strategy in mid-2008, but, a year later, has failed to produce it. I know that she was a busy bee in 2008, so I pardon her.

Approximately two thirds of the food crops that feed the world rely on pollination by insects or other animals to produce healthy fruits and seeds. It is estimated that one third of the food that we eat is pollinated by bees. The value of the bees' service has been estimated at £200 million a year to the UK economy, and the retail value of what they pollinate

was valued at closer to £1 billion. Simon Potts, head of pollination research at Reading University, said:

"If we had a serious loss of honeybees in the UK, inevitably food prices would have to increase. Essentially, we would have to import fruits from overseas."

Northern Ireland has a large fruit industry, and apple producers are concerned about the decline in the bee population. My Upper Bann constituency is well known for its orchards and for the Bramley apple in particular, as was stated by many Members today.

It is estimated that the apple industry is worth in the region of £50 million a year, and the long-term decline in the number of bees would have a serious impact on that and other fruit industries.

It is estimated that bee numbers in the UK have fallen by between 15% and 30% in the past two years. That mirrors the steep declines and the emptying of hives that have been witnessed in the US, the mainland, Europe and elsewhere. According to Dr Robert Paxton, from the School of Biological Science at Queen's University, the island of Ireland has 100 species of bees, of which approximately one third is in serious decline. That is due to normal winter decline and bad weather.

Reports from a number of countries show that an unusually high number of bee colonies have died or are dying. That is true of many European countries and north America. The cause of the colonies' collapse does not appear to be a single pest or disease but appears to vary depending on location. In north America, a number of pressures appear to have combined to produce highly unusual levels of hive mortality. Research in England and Wales shows that weather conditions and a high level of mites and associated viruses have been the cause of decline in bee numbers.

It is worth noting that significant declines in honeybees have been recorded before. For instance, there was a decline in the USA in the 1880s, in England in the 1920s and the 1960s, and on the Isle of Wight in 1906.

Last November, the European Parliament adopted a motion for a resolution on the problems of bee-keeping that pressed all 27 EU Governments and the European Commission to take action. The Parliament adopted a resolution with 485 votes in favour, 13 against and 5 abstentions. The resolution called on the European Commission to put in place measures to encourage the creation of ecological recovery zones in parts of fields that are difficult to cultivate. The resolution called on the Commission, the executive body of the EU, to immediately step up further research into the causes of the decline and to make additional budgetary resources available for research.

In September 2008, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development announced that she would draw up

a bee strategy in Northern Ireland. In answer to recent questions from my colleague Leslie Cree, she stated that she would wait until the publication of the DEFRA strategy before producing her own strategy. The DEFRA strategy was published in March, and we have not yet seen one here. However, I know that a word to the wise is enough.

The main research institute in Northern Ireland is the Agri-Food and Bioscience Institute, which provides scientific and laboratory support. Most of AFBI's work on honeybees has been statutory, although it keeps up to date with research developments through liaising with the national bee unit at the central science laboratory in York, Dr Paxton's bee research group at Queen's University, Belfast, the bee research unit in the Republic, and through discussions with local bee-keeping organisations.

At present, it is unclear whether any of the investment made by DEFRA will find its way to Northern Ireland. We in Northern Ireland cannot afford to let our industry collapse. Many people want to see the advanced technology that we have in our Province used to stop the decline and start the wheels turning the other way. Our bee industry is very important.

England and Wales have a co-ordinated research strategy that is linked to bee-keepers and the Government. Northern Ireland is in danger of being left behind. I know that the Minister has given a commitment to producing a strategy, and we cannot afford, nor can we be allowed, to drift. I ask the Minister to tell the House when that strategy will be published.

I congratulate my colleagues for tabling the motion, and I commend it to the House. The motion notes with concern the decline in the bee population in Northern Ireland and the impact that that trend may have on agriculture, the environment and the wider economy; it further notes the investment by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in research into bee population decline in England and the publication of a bee health strategy for England; and it calls on our Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to invest in research into bee health and to publish a bee health strategy.

Nature plays a very important part in our society. Many of us have close links to the land, so we cannot forget that bees and insects have an important part to play in the health of the land and of society in general and that we also have an important part to play in protecting them. We welcome the support for the motion across the House. I will not mention all the Members who spoke in case I forget someone, but we welcome the support of all of them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the decline in the bee population in Northern Ireland and the potential impact this trend may have on agriculture, the environment, and the wider economy; further notes the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' investment in research into bee population decline in England and the publication of a bee health strategy for England; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to invest in local research into bee health and to publish a bee health strategy.

Adjourned at 4.27 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Swine Flu

Tuesday 9 June 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have been informed by the Speaker that he will be absent from Parliament Buildings on official Assembly business on Monday 15 June 2009.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that he wishes to make a statement on the outbreak of swine flu.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I wish to provide Members with a further update on swine flu. Members will be aware that my previous ministerial statement followed the confirmation of the first case of swine flu in Northern Ireland. Since that statement, I have announced three further swine flu cases. I am pleased to report that the first person diagnosed as having swine flu has now made a full recovery. Since today's statement was printed, two further cases have been confirmed, both of which involved travellers who were returning from the USA.

The picture across the world is changing quite rapidly, and we continue to monitor the situation very closely. As of 8 June 2009, 73 countries now have confirmed cases, with 25,952 people confirmed as having the virus and a total of 139 deaths. Throughout the UK, 664 cases have now been confirmed. We have also seen more cases in the Republic of Ireland, where 11 cases have now been confirmed. Given the increasing number of cases worldwide, we can expect to see more here.

As I said on previous occasions, the public can be reassured that, for the vast majority of people affected in the UK, the symptoms have been similar to that of season flu. However, I am acutely aware that a number of people in Scotland have been admitted to hospital in the past week and that some of them are in intensive care. Although those developments are of concern, people should not be alarmed unduly. They are a reminder that we must not be complacent and that we must maintain a high state of readiness so that we are fully prepared.

We remain at World Health Organization pandemic alert level 5, which means that a pandemic is thought to be imminent but not necessarily inevitable. Recently, the World Health Organization advised that we are getting closer to phase 6 — that a pandemic is declared. It is not possible to state when that may happen, but we are preparing for a possible announcement in the near future. The move to phase 6 will be a serious development, but the World Health Organization alert levels reflect the global view, and any action taken in the UK will need to be based on the situation here.

In Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the UK, we are following a containment strategy that includes supplying antivirals both to those who develop the disease and, as a preventative measure, to their close contacts. To

date, the strategy has been effective in delaying the spread of the disease and buying us valuable time.

The number of people developing the disease is certain to rise over the coming weeks, as we have seen already in parts of Scotland and England. Therefore, we need to be prepared for the next stage, which is when the outbreak can no longer be contained and spreads more widely. At that point, we expect to have to move from a containment strategy to a mitigation strategy. That means that, when the number of cases increases beyond a certain level, we will have to keep the extent to which we supply antivirals to contacts under review, supplying them only to immediate close contacts rather than to all contacts in the first instance.

I understand fully how the emerging situation may cause public concern. However, the public can be reassured that we are well prepared to deal with the situation should a global pandemic be declared or if we need to move beyond mitigation stage. The World Health Organization has said that the UK and, therefore, Northern Ireland, is one of the best-prepared countries in the world. We have been preparing for a potential pandemic for some years. That state of readiness will be vital, especially as we approach our flu season. We know that there is the potential for a further wave of the swine flu virus in the autumn, when it may be even more widespread. In light of that, I have been working closely with ministerial colleagues across the UK to secure production of a pre-pandemic vaccine. This is an opportunity to obtain vaccine supplies for the UK in advance of a pandemic wave. Those arrangements may ensure that we have enough pre-pandemic vaccine to protect at least half of the population from swine flu by December.

In addition, as part of plans to deal with a pandemic, sleeping contracts for pandemic vaccine are in place. That means that, if the World Health Organization were to move to phase 6, we will have access to two doses of pandemic vaccine for everyone in Northern Ireland, if needed. It will be several months before sufficient vaccine supplies become available; therefore, it is essential that we continue to use our stock of antiviral drugs carefully, so that the public will be protected during the winter months.

We already have a stock of antiviral drugs to cover half of the population, and I have ensured that steps are in place to increase that stock, so that there will be antiviral drugs to treat up to 80% of the population. Previous global pandemics have not affected more than one third of the population.

The current advice to people who suspect that they have swine flu is to stay at home and contact their GP if they feel unwell. That is extremely important in helping to reduce the spread of the virus. If we do see a sharp rise in the number of cases, it will be important

that symptomatic patients at home can have access to antivirals without placing unnecessary additional pressure on GP practices and community pharmacies. I have been working with my counterparts in the other UK health Departments to develop the national pandemic flu service. That system will co-ordinate the distribution of antivirals and will have the capacity to cope with any likely surges in demand should the virus become more widespread. The national pandemic flu service will be the first of its kind in the world and will be available from October.

The aim is to enable symptomatic patients across the whole UK to access antiviral drugs by either calling a single 0800 number or by accessing a supporting website application. The service will enable people to have their symptoms assessed against a list of key symptoms and risk factors either over the phone or online.

Cross-government plans are also well established. Although there have been no cases of swine flu in schools in Northern Ireland to date, parents, teachers and pupils can be reassured that our links with the Department of Education continue and that robust plans are in place should a school be affected by a case of swine flu. Schools in Northern Ireland close for the summer break much earlier than in the rest of the UK, and that will be an advantage in helping to contain the possible spread of infection.

Officials in my Department, together with staff in the Public Health Agency and the health and social care sector, have been working continuously to ensure that there is robust surveillance and appropriate testing and treatment of individuals who are at risk. I am pleased to report that, since my previous statement, full confirmatory testing for swine flu can now be carried out in the laboratory at the Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH) in Belfast. Previously, after initial tests were carried out in the RVH, samples were sent to the national laboratory for final-stage testing. That new system is a welcome development, as it greatly speeds up the testing process.

It remains vital that the public continue to receive the information and advice that they need. Every home in Northern Ireland should now have received a leaflet that provides further public advice and information. Again, I ask people to read that leaflet and to keep it safe. A major publicity campaign, which includes television, radio and newspaper advertising, has also been running in the national and local media. That has been effective in communicating the steps that people can take to protect themselves. Our message remains very clear, and everyone has his or her part to play.

We should all be taking simple, effective hygiene measures, such as using a tissue to cover one's mouth and nose when sneezing, disposing of the tissue and then washing one's hands with soap and water or

sanitising gel: 'Catch it, Bin it, Kill it.' The Northern Ireland swine flu helpline continues to operate on 0800 0514 142 to provide advice. Information on swine flu is also available from the UK swine flu information line on 0800 1513 513. Posters and information leaflets that give advice to travellers returning from swine flu-affected areas have been provided to all ports and airports across Northern Ireland.

I continue to receive full and detailed briefings daily on the national and international picture. That includes participating, along with the Health Ministers for Wales and Scotland, in regular COBRA meetings, which the new Secretary of State for Health, Andy Burnham, will now chair. My Department also continues to work closely with the Department of Health and Children in the Republic of Ireland, and I will meet Mary Harney tomorrow to discuss the current situation in Northern Ireland and the Republic.

I assure the public and the Assembly that I am continuing to give the situation the attention that it deserves. The World Health Organization has now given a clear indication that we are moving closer to the pandemic phase, and we will monitor developments very closely. I will report again to the Assembly if significant changes to the current situation occur. In the meantime, Members can remain assured that we have the necessary capability to respond to swine flu. The health and social care service is well prepared, and I thank Health Service staff for the commitment, support and dedication that they have demonstrated in the face of a potential pandemic.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and for keeping the House updated on the swine flu alert. I, too, commend the good work of staff in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in dealing with the outbreak.

Despite new cases of swine flu being confirmed over the weekend, I welcome the fact that the number here remains relatively low. I also welcome the fact that those cases appear to be mild and that the people involved either travelled from the affected areas or have been in contact with someone who has travelled from the affected areas. How confident is the Minister that the confirmed cases here are an accurate reflection of the situation internationally, given that those affected have mild symptoms and that some people will not present for advice or treatment?

10.45 pm

The Minister also referred to the situation in Scotland, and media reports there have indicated that perhaps 43 cases of swine flu have been confirmed in one day. That is obviously very worrying, but perhaps

more worrying is the fact that three people with swine flu are reported to be receiving intensive care, although I am aware that they may have pre-existing illnesses. Is the Minister concerned that our hospitals will not be able to cope? Furthermore, are adequate plans in place for anyone who may require hospital admission and for those who may need to be treated in isolation?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I confirm that 11 patients are being treated in hospitals in Scotland as a result of swine flu. Some of those patients are in intensive care, while others are responding and recovering well.

The speed of transmission is one of the features of this particular flu virus: not only is it a novel virus, but it moves very quickly. For example, yesterday at 12.00 noon, the total number of swine flu confirmations in the UK was 621, while this morning that figure had risen to 664. That demonstrates just how quickly swine flu can advance.

The Member also asked if we were receiving an accurate picture on the virus. It is widely accepted that the UK has one of the best surveillance systems in the world; therefore, we can be relatively confident that we are receiving an accurate picture. There is a wide variance in other countries such as the United States, where officials consider that the number of confirmed swine flu cases could be out by as much as 10:1 or 100,000 cases, or 20:1 or 200,000 cases. We have a very good surveillance system in the UK, and that is internationally accepted.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I also commend the Department on its work to date on this particular virus and the staff at our hospitals for the preparations that they have made.

Given the potential for a widespread pandemic that is being dealt with and controlled by antiviral medication, will the Minister give any indication of when the first batch of vaccines will be made available to the people of Northern Ireland? In his statement he said that the vaccine will not be with us for some months, but that is rather open-ended.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: One of the major vaccine-producing factories in Dresden has now been taken out of mothballs by the relevant manufacturer, and capacity for vaccine production has been increased. However, there is obviously a huge demand from Governments around the world who wish to buy vaccines.

The creation of the vaccine involves the isolation of the virus seed, and that provides the means of creating the vaccine. That process is and has been under way, but it will be some months before vaccines begin to come through.

The UK has placed sleeping contracts for vaccines with the manufacturers, which will be activated if the pandemic alert level moves to phase 6. That pandemic alert level is at phase 5, and in the meantime we have ordered pre-pandemic vaccines that are made up of the same material. However, we do not anticipate receiving those vaccines until the end of 2009. That is the quickest time that can be achieved, and there will be a long delivery time as every country in the world will be chasing vaccines if the pandemic level moves to phase 6 and in the way that some experts anticipate.

Mrs Hanna: I thank the Minister for his update. Had the people who are in the intensive care unit in Scotland been in Mexico, or did they get the flu second-hand? When will the progress report on the vaccine be available? The Minister said that it would be the end of the year at the earliest before pandemic status was reached. I appreciate that many countries want the vaccine, so would the winter be the earliest time at which the vaccine would be available, regardless of the date of a serious outbreak?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I tried to explain to Tom Buchanan, we must make a guess on that. We are in the hands of the manufacturers. Under the sleeping contract, the UK is at the top of the queue, and Northern Ireland will get its share of the 132 million vaccines in our order through that contract. However, until phase 6 is declared, we are in a pre-pandemic phase. We have ordered vaccines under a pre-pandemic contract, and we are also at the top of the queue for those vaccines. We are in the hands of the manufacturers, who have to isolate the seed to make the vaccine and then get production rolling.

The seasonal flu vaccine is being manufactured, and the orders for that will be filled by the end of June 2009. That will allow the manufacturers to move on to vaccines for swine flu. I estimate that the vaccine will be available at the end of this year or, I hope, before then. As we are aware, there will be major demand for the vaccine, so the question will be about quantities and delivery.

Mr McCarthy: I also welcome the Minister's detailed statement. Communication with everyone in Northern Ireland is paramount, and the Minister is communicating very well on the issue. Have the latest victims travelled to Northern Ireland from faraway places? Aside from such travellers, have there been any other cases?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I confirm that the new cases are as a result of travel, primarily to the United States. Mrs Hanna asked about the people in the intensive care unit in Scotland. In their cases, the primary cause is travel. I do not have the exact details, but community transmission or person-to-person infection is occurring

in Scotland, where the virus has spread among people who have not travelled; that development is worrying. The new cases in Northern Ireland concern one person who had been in New York and one person who had been in Florida. Before that, one case had come from the US, and one had come from Mexico. In all the confirmed cases in Northern Ireland, the patients have either recovered or are doing well.

Mr Easton: I also commend the Department on its hard work. I am impressed by the fact that the Department issues daily updates on swine flu. How many people in Northern Ireland have been treated because they have had contact with the small number of individuals who have fully contracted swine flu? Will the Minister advise whether such people take Tamiflu straight away or wait for symptoms to develop?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I do not have precise figures on the number of people who have been provided with antiviral medicine as a result of being in contact with people who have been confirmed as having the virus. A reasonably large number of people form part of the containment stage, and it goes beyond family members.

People are advised to take Tamiflu immediately. To date, there have been no cases of transmission in Northern Ireland; people who have contracted swine flu have come into the country with it. It has not moved beyond any of the confirmed individual cases. To an extent, that is because of the way in which we have isolated people with the virus. We have issued advice for them to stay at home, and that is an important message.

Antiviral medicine has been issued for those who have been in immediate contact with people who have contracted the virus. It is important that individuals who have been given antiviral drugs take the entire course. However, as numbers increase, the point will be reached beyond which it is not feasible to give antiviral drugs to everyone who is a contact because of concern that the virus will mutate and become able to defend itself. During the containment stage, we reach a wide circle as far as individual confirmation is concerned.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Like the Members who have spoken previously, I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement and the daily updates that help our work. I commend him and his Department on their work on swine flu.

I have a couple of questions. The Minister said that the alert will continue. Will he outline how often COBRA will meet? He also said that he will be meeting Mary Harney, Minister for Health and Children in the South, tomorrow. It will be useful to receive an update following that meeting so that we can have an all-

island view of the problem. In a previous statement to the House, the Minister said that the incidence of swine flu may increase with the coming of winter, which is something we should keep an eye on. Will the Minister outline the strategies he will put in place to cope with that; and, if it is not possible for him to do that today, will he write to Members on that point, as we are being warned of the possibility that swine flu may increase in the winter months?

The Minister of Health, Social Security and Public Safety: As far as the final point is concerned, the answer is yes; we have been warned about that. It is anticipated that the flu virus may follow the patterns of previous viruses, abating in summer and returning in winter. Damp conditions in the autumn will favour a return of the flu.

We have plans in place, and we refine them constantly. We consider how health and social care services will respond. If the flu becomes a pandemic, one third of the population may be affected, which will include one third of the workforce in hospitals, GP surgeries, community pharmacies and so on. Therefore, I have asked the trusts to plan for that eventuality because the current Health Service may bear no relation to that in six months time as it tries to cope with a swine flu epidemic. We will reduce services to those that are absolutely essential, particularly in secondary care.

I will be meeting Mary Harney tomorrow at a North/South ministerial meeting on food safety, and I have arranged for a round-table meeting afterwards with her and her officials. My officials are in constant contact with those in the Irish Republic, where there are now 11 confirmed cases of swine flu. Primarily, those cases involve people who have travelled from the US and Mexico, but I believe that there is one case that has been transmitted locally.

COBRA is the key driving force in the UK. It is chaired by the Health Secretary in London, and other Health Ministers are invited and take part in it. It determines the national response to all the issues that I have talked to the House about, including antiviral drugs and vaccines.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Housing (Amendment) Bill

First Stage

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I beg to introduce the Housing Amendment Bill [NIA 7/08], which is a Bill to amend the law relating to housing.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

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

Diseases of Animals Bill

Consideration Stage

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Consideration Stage of the Diseases of Animals Bill will not be moved today. I met the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee on 1 June and explained my reasons for not doing so. I will discuss the matter further with the Committee and others over the next few days.

11.00 am

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Comptroller and Auditor General

Resolved:

That this Assembly, in accordance with section 65(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, nominates Mr Kieran Donnelly as the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland. — [*The Chairperson of the Audit Committee (Mr Newton).*]

College Courses for Older People

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.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to enter into discussions with the Regional Colleges about the options for, and legalities surrounding, the reinstatement of concessionary course fees for older people; and seeks the Minister's acknowledgement that the availability of these discounted courses provides considerable social, as well as educational, benefits to older people.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I will open the debate. At the outset, I thank the Minister for his presence. Given the interest that has been shown in the issue, I am sure that he will tell us how many questions he has received from Members on the matter over the past number of months. Indeed, the information pack that Members received from Research Services — I thank them for that — shows that many Members have raised questions.

In 2008, prompted by information that it received from groups that represent older people, the Committee lobbied the Minister on the matter. Those groups indicated that their members were unable to engage in college courses because they no longer received discounts and, therefore, could not afford their courses.

To be fair to the Minister, in June 2008 he issued a press release, which is in Members' information packs, that outlined the assistance that is available to allow older people to access discounted fees through means testing. However, when representatives of Age Concern and Help the Aged briefed the Committee on 29 April 2009, they told us that their members were still not able to access reduced fees for college courses. What has gone wrong? Why is the new system not working?

Fortunately, the Committee has a good working relationship with the Minister and the Department. Therefore, it is not for me to stand here and blame either; we want to find a mature way forward to resolve the issue. We must examine the fact that the colleges are now incorporated and, as a result, make their own decisions on who receives concessionary fees.

The current situation on concessionary fees dates back to the introduction in October 2006 of the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006. Those regulations were put in place with the aim of giving older people more rights and protections in the workplace and more access to training that might otherwise have been denied them due to their age. The introduction of the regulations was motivated partly by the fact that older people form an increasingly large percentage of our population, and that is reflected in the workplace.

Therefore, under the regulations, providers of vocational training cannot discriminate against people either receiving or accessing training on grounds of age. Regulation 21 states that clearly. That is the reason why, I assume, colleges believe that they would defy the law if they were to grant older people discounted fees or courses. It is ironic that legislation that was designed to protect older people actually causes them to lose out.

The regulations create a loophole that is known as "objective justification". That means that differences in treatment on the grounds of age can be made if they are justifiable.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way; I will not detain her for very many minutes. Given what Ms Ramsey has just said, does she not think that it would be appropriate for the Executive to hurry up the introduction of a full-time commissioner to look after the interests of older people?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: I always give way to older people.

Mr McCarthy: Thanks very much.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: If Kieran settles himself down, I will come to that in the course of my speech.

As I said, the regulations provide a loophole through which differences in treatment of people on the grounds of age can be justified. However, that deliberate loophole applies to employers, not to training providers, which is what causes the problem. Colleges believe that they cannot offer discounted fees to older people because that might disadvantage other groups. It does not seem to matter that those older people have paid into the system all their lives and that it might be good for them to get a little back. Nor do the other benefits of attending such courses seem to matter, such as social benefits to people's lives. The only factor that is

weighed up is whether someone else might feel that they are being discriminated against. We are not unique here; the regulations apply in England, Scotland and Wales. Even in the Twenty-six Counties, where so much has been done for older people, they only get a discount if they are over 70 years old and meet the medical card qualification criteria.

As I said earlier, the Minister, to his credit, admitted in a response to a Committee member's question that, in the context of the effect on discounted fees for older people, the regulations come under the law of unintended consequences. As a result, he attempted to find a way round the legislation by applying means testing. I welcome that approach. However, as Members know, older people have a great deal of dignity and, when faced with questions about their ability to pay for courses, they do not want to feel that they are receiving a handout. In many cases they decide against doing the course; that is something that we have all seen.

A number of groups provided presentations on discounted courses. It is important that courses are available for older people. We are all faced on a daily basis with the terrible problem of isolation for older people. We all know of groups who are often pushed to the edge of society, and we know that exclusion can easily occur when people feel like that. Exclusion among older people is a growing issue faced by society. Given the advances in medical technology and so many other things, more people are living to a much greater age. That often means that they are alone, without a partner. Furthermore, their families are preoccupied with their own lives. Isolation can be a real danger.

That is why groups such as Age Concern and Help the Aged are so keen that discounted courses are available to older people. For a small cost, they can be part of a group and engage in social activity. They can make friends, plug into networks and take courses that allow them to better understand things like the Internet. That enables them to better relate to younger generations and be part of things generally. In many cases, the contact and purpose provided by a course has health benefits, which, as we know, have positive cost implications. The Assembly should find ways to help older people stay active and should not close down the avenues available to them. As a member of the Health Committee, I recognise the huge positive cost implications for the care of older people. However, if we do not facilitate older people in remaining an active part of society, there will be negative consequences.

Objective 2 of PSA 7 in the Programme for Government aims, as Kieran McCarthy said, to introduce co-ordinated strategic action to promote social inclusion for older people. We will not achieve that objective if we continue to push older people, intentionally or otherwise, out of mainstream society. We claim to attach importance to our commitments on lifelong

learning. I am not a great believer in spouting statistics during debates, because it tends to obscure the issues. However, it is clear from the figures that enrolments in courses that are favoured by older people have fallen, and we know that the overall number of older people who access courses has fallen.

As the Minister will clarify, it is not the case that the age limits set in regulations for state-funded schemes are outside the scope of the EU directives that inform those regulations. The Minister will be hoping that the Committee does not expect him to produce more money for something else, but it does. Nevertheless, it is important that a proactive approach is taken, given the health issues at stake, the fact that Mr McGimpsey is the Minister's party colleague, and the Executive. It is up to the Minister to talk to his Executive colleagues to see whether this one small concession for older people can be advanced.

Recently, I received a letter from Dame Joan Harbison, the older people's advocate, in which she said that she supports the motion. It is important that we get a response from politicians, but we must also work with the community and voluntary sector collectively in the interim to make progress on some issues. That will take us to the appointment of an older people's commissioner.

On 29 April, representatives from Help the Aged and Age Concern made passionate presentations to the Committee. They were happy that we facilitated the meeting and that we listened to them. They were delighted to hear that we were going to table a motion for debate in the House. I know that the Minister has been looking at some of the issues raised, but I hope that, from today, we will hear positive, concrete answers on how to advance the matter. I ask the Assembly to support the motion.

Mr Easton: The motion goes to the heart of what is meant by lifelong learning, which, if properly realised, will advantage our increasing population of older people, giving them so much more than just education. Of course, we want to plan properly for future demographics. Research informs us that, by 2021, 35% of our education population will be aged over 50, rising to 44% by 2041. It will be advantageous for that population to receive effective instruction, to be better informed and to have its educational aspirations cultivated and nurtured. Our goal should be to have a knowledgeable and learned older population. However, there is more. The motion asks the Minister for Employment and Learning to take cognisance of the social benefits that concessionary courses afford older people. Concessionary courses give older people an opportunity to engage collectively on the common ground that education provides. In many cases, the opportunity to socialise combats social isolation and loneliness by providing an educational community that improves the culture of our society.

There are other reasons for the Minister to prioritise discussions with the regional colleges. Our population of under-35s is decreasing, whereas our population of over-35s is increasing. I ask the Minister to acknowledge fully the economic necessity of ensuring that our older workforce has the education, skills and capacity to address the real economic difficulties that we face. Our economy faces many challenges. We are in a global recession, which means that, if we are to progress, we must ensure that our older workforce, as noted earlier, is educated with the skills and knowledge to meet the economic demands of the twenty-first century. Standing still on the issue is not an option for the Minister. If he does so, he will, in reality, be going backwards. He must think outside the box, although I acknowledge the existence of age discrimination legislation, which is positive, and the fact that opportunities have been provided for people who receive rates relief.

The Minister must act urgently, and it will be good for our regional colleges if ministerial discussions come to a successful conclusion. I continue to be impressed by the comprehensive prospectus offered by the South Eastern Regional College in my constituency of North Down. Real opportunities are available that will add value to many older persons' educational career. The challenge will be to discover how, within the existing legislative constraints, we can provide concessionary schemes that allow our older population to take advantage of education opportunities. Many in that population group have the time, capacity and motivation to take the full educational value of the courses offered by the regional colleges. We want to remove educational barriers that face our older population. We want to make educational opportunities accessible. There is no doubt about it: financial constraints act as a hindrance.

11.15 am

In the past, there have been inconsistencies in approach. I am sure that many Members will accept my analysis that there is major ignorance in sections of our society about the real and tangible benefits of having an age-diverse workforce. Many older people will add value to our economy, because they will be able to bring experience, education and innovation to the table. Is that not exactly what we require? We must listen to employers when they inform us that an age-diverse workforce is economically good for us, and we must listen to the wider community when it celebrates the advantages of an age-diverse workforce.

I wish the Minister well in the discussions with our regional colleges. If we get this right, it can truly be a win-win situation for everyone. I support the motion.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I welcome the debate and thank the Committee Chairperson for securing it. I also thank the Minister for attending. I am a strong supporter

of older people's participation in further education and lifelong learning. Having researched the subject to degree level and having taught in the field for over 20 years, I come to it with background knowledge of the benefits that older people get from further education.

Older people, like everyone else, benefit educationally and socially by learning with others. Participation in education can increase social inclusion and reduce discrimination against older people. We must give older people the opportunity to contribute to society rather than often seeing them as a financial burden. It is proven that significant health and well-being benefits can come through participation in further education.

In a country whose population is getting older, the benefits of further education for older people cannot be underestimated for the Health Service, carers and wider society. In that respect, there is space and reason for interdepartmental consideration of older people and their needs. It is, therefore, deeply regrettable that concessionary fees have been removed.

I recognise that the Minister's hands are tied by the unintended consequences of a European directive that requires all member states to outlaw discrimination in employment and vocational training on the grounds of age. It is proper and correct to outlaw age discrimination, and maybe I should declare an interest at this point. I recognise that, in the past, the Minister has accepted and questioned that anomaly. However, it is of great importance to many individuals and society as a whole that we address that anomaly as soon as possible. It cannot be right that an older person can avail of a bus pass or rates relief but cannot get concessions for education, which, as we have stated, has the potential to bring social, health and economic benefits both to the individual and to society.

The time has come for us to look for a solution to the problem. What options are open to the Minister and his Department? Does he have the power to amend the regulations? What discussions has he had with his counterparts in England? What discussions has he had to date with further education colleges here?

I draw to Members' attention the fact that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is in charge of equality legislation in Northern Ireland, and I ask the Minister what steps that Department has taken to assist the Department for Employment and Learning with this case. I urge the Minister to continue discussions with regional colleges, and I ask him what options he considers to be open to them. I take great pleasure in supporting the motion.

Mr Attwood: I apologise to the House that I will be unable to stay for the rest of the debate and the Minister's response, as I have to attend a Committee meeting that began at 11.00 am.

I concur with virtually every comment in the debate so far. It is self-evident and compelling that the provision of access to discounted courses for older people will ease isolation, improve activity, increase skills, build relationships and contribute in every manner conceivable to the well-being of the individual and the community. I will not rehearse any of those arguments. Instead, I have questions for the Minister to see whether, as Rev Coulter said, a route can be plotted to resolve the matter in a satisfactory way.

I note what Rev Coulter said about the Minister questioning the anomaly. Is the Minister satisfied that, in legal terms, the anomaly has been fully and exhaustively probed to determine whether discounted college fees could be offered? I seek reassurance on that because there is a comparable issue in health: the Minister of Health has determined that people who are approaching the age of 40 cannot be treated more favourably than younger people in the provision of fertility treatment. That has been determined even though it is my view that, legally and under the European regulations, people who are approaching 40 could be treated more favourably than people in lower age categories. Therefore, I ask the Minister whether he has sought exhaustive legal advice that confirms that he cannot advise people that discounted fees can be introduced because of the regulation arising from the European directive.

The Minister may be legally constrained and, as Rev Coulter hinted, it may be that the equality aspect of the matter is not being taken forward with sufficient vigour in another part of government. However, in the absence of a legal resolution to the matter, has the Minister costed the provision of fully or partially discounted fees to people aged 65 and over? If the argument about taking care of our older citizens and cherishing them is so compelling, should not some work be done to assess the cost of assisting those people with discounted fees? The Minister, the Committee and the Assembly may well have to make a strategic assessment that discounted fees for older people are of such merit and worth that they should be found through a subvention from government funds.

I also want to raise a broader political issue, which, although not demonstrated acutely in this case, is relevant nonetheless: there is still an imbalance of power between the Government and the education authorities. Evidence of that can be seen in the way that the regional colleges have chosen to withdraw discounted fees. Given the impact of that issue on equality, the Programme for Government and Government priorities generally, the Government must be given sight of it in advance so that they can form a view on it, rather than regional colleges being allowed to act independently and not have due regard for the authority of the Minister and the Assembly. The same applies to

the University of Ulster in respect of the proposed Yorkgate campus and Queen's University Belfast in respect of its takeover of Stranmillis University College.

Ms Lo: I welcome and support the motion. Given previous exchanges with the Minister, I know that he is frustrated by this unintended consequence of the legislation on age discrimination. Rather than enhancing pensioners' equal opportunities, it has disadvantaged their ability to participate in lifelong learning.

The number of students of pensionable age has been falling steadily over the past few years, from 16,978 in 2004-05 to 14,048 in 2006-07. I am quite sure that the withdrawal of concessionary fees in an economic downturn will reduce those numbers further. A 30-week course used to cost £76 in some colleges. However, without the concession, pensioners now have to pay double that amount.

The majority of pensioner students take non-vocational courses; there are almost three times as many pensioner students taking those courses as there are taking vocational courses. The Department's policy of curtailing funding for non-accredited courses also forced colleges to stop running many of the recreational classes, such as art and craft or gardening, that are very popular with our older people.

Figures over the past three years also show that about 75% of students of pensionable age are female. I ask the Minister to look into that in the context of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. This issue is having a negative impact when it comes not only to age, but to gender. Can we challenge that practice under our own laws?

We have spoken about advocating for lifelong learning, and people are living longer and retiring much later, sometimes out of necessity. Surely there is a need to value age diversity in our workforce. It is also essential to keep older people active in updating their knowledge and skills. That is beneficial not only to the individual but to the overall economy.

At the launch of an IT project at Ormeau Road library, I met several older people who were learning how to use the Internet and send e-mails. They were telling me that they can now shop online and e-mail their families, including grandchildren, who may have moved to Australia or elsewhere. Surely that is a big benefit to us all.

Like others, I emphasise the health and social benefits of lifelong learning for older people. It is very important that older people have a routine and something to look forward to week after week that will take them out of the house and out of social isolation. There is so much loneliness for older people living alone; their families have perhaps moved far away, and no one calls on them. It is essential that they go out every Monday or

Tuesday, for example, to their classes and to meet other people.

Keeping an active mind is also very important. It gives older people much better mental health and well-being. The physical benefits of getting out of the house and walking down to a centre or a college cannot be underestimated.

Therefore, I call on the Minister to review the situation. We all need to put as much effort as we can into addressing this anomaly by giving older people that bit of life that they want. They really do miss their classes. I have been receiving e-mails and talking to older people, and they say that they really miss their gardening and cookery classes. Those classes are so important to them, and we should not deprive them of those opportunities.

11.30 am

Mr Hilditch: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue. Many constituents have contacted our offices about the fact that in 2008-09, it cost more to enrol for courses at the Newtownabbey campus than in Lisburn. That was even the case for non-vocational 15-week courses such as painting for pleasure.

As Anna Lo highlighted, fee discrepancies is just one of the issues that have been brought to Members' attention. I have heard from lecturers who are concerned that they will lose their jobs if the enrolment numbers required to allow courses to go ahead are not met. I have also had contact with students who simply cannot afford to pay the increased fees.

Students planning to attend the Northern Regional College from September 2008 to June 2009 have been told that colleges have amended their policies for providing concessionary fees to people of pensionable age. However, the Southern Regional College in Lisburn was able to offer a discounted rate to pensioners during the same enrolment period.

I understand that the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 forced colleges to amend concessionary fees and to remove unjustified age-based discrimination in employment and vocational training. However, in September 2008, one college in Lisburn was able to offer a 15-week art class to pensioners for £57, while the same course in the Newtownabbey campus cost £113. I am bemused as to why there is a £56 difference in the fees for the same course just because of differing locations.

The same predicament appears to have arisen in the enrolment for courses that will run from September 2009 to June 2010. The Bangor campus is offering the painting for pleasure course to pensioners at a 50% reduced fee of £68, while the same course is being offered for £100 in Newtownabbey, a difference of £32 a year.

There are other discrepancies with the way in which fees are dealt with generally. I wish to hear the Minister's views on why students who are entitled to disability living allowance or incapacity benefit do not qualify for concessionary fees, but those who are entitled to pension credit, working tax credit or child tax credit are entitled to concessionary fees.

That is a debate for another day, but I urge the Minister to reassess the structure of concessionary fees and to ensure that all colleges in Northern Ireland charge the same amount. I understand that colleges set their fees in line with the economic climate and their enrolment trends and statistics, but there must be a level playing field.

We need to help rather than hinder our older generation. It is expected that the number of people over 50 will increase by 35% by 2012. Getting out and doing courses during the day is a lifeline for many people, and it gives them a purpose to socialise. Pensioners simply cannot afford the increased fees.

We need a fair, identical system in each constituency. I urge the Minister to reassess the structure of concessionary fees and to ensure that all colleges in Northern Ireland adopt a consistent approach and charge equal fees for vocational and non-vocational courses. I support the motion.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006 should be welcomed as positive legislation. However, they should not prevent concessionary fees being offered to older people. In this case, an urgently required piece of equality legislation is being interpreted as discriminating against older people.

Further education colleges have applied concessionary fees arbitrarily. I attended a meeting in the Southern Regional College in Newry with other constituency MLAs, and it was clear then that only two local colleges were applying the legislation strictly. Students, particularly older students, were not consulted or given enough warning about the impact that the changes would have on them.

In the regulations, direct discrimination on grounds of age is prohibited unless it can be justified objectively. Objective justification recognises that differing treatment on the grounds of age can sometimes be justified; and that should apply to the provision of concessionary fees for older people.

On a visit to the Southern Regional College in Newry on 26 June 2008, the Minister stated that all six colleges in the North had agreed to add to their means-testing criteria that decide who is entitled to concessionary fees. People receiving rates relief will be entitled to claim concessionary fees.

However, some older people do not access the rates relief scheme, and they do not know that they may be entitled to other benefits, such as pension credit. They often do courses at colleges, but because of the rules, they must pay full whack and do not qualify for concessionary fees. People who do not receive benefits are not necessarily better off, and it is essential to distinguish between justifiable differences in treatment and discrimination, which must be prohibited.

I have spoken to older people whom the legislation has affected. They looked forward to taking courses but having found that their fees had, in some cases, increased by 400% to 500%, they could not afford to participate in them. In Britain, some areas continue to offer concessionary fees and actively encourage older people to participate in courses. It has already been stated that in the Twenty-six Counties, people over the age of 70 can access concessions.

In June 2008, the Minister stated that learning is a lifelong process.

That is true. I have spoken to many older people who regard courses that they attend as being therapeutic and occasions for socialising with their peers. Many of those people are carers, and attending courses can be a welcome form of respite for them. Once again, older people have been put in a position in which they feel marginalised and not appreciated. When will we stop paying lip service to the concept of age inclusion and start doing something to include older people? They have contributed so much to our society, and it is time that we gave them the recognition that they deserve. Lifelong learning should mean just that, and rather than erect obstacles, we should make it easier for people to access courses that can have such a positive impact on them.

I ask the Minister to pursue all available avenues that are open to him to resolve the problem for older people who need to access those courses. It is time that a commissioner for older people was appointed. The situation needs urgent attention. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs M Bradley: In many debates, Members have referred to the plight of older people: how they must choose between heating and eating; the awful experiences that they have had; and how they feel threatened every day by their own communities. Older people are under constant pressures, which are gradually wearing them down, and they are becoming frail, disinterested people, rather than people who should be living a full life, at a relaxed pace and in their own way.

Equality is a buzzword that we all like to throw about. An equality-based decision supposedly led to the withdrawal of educational concessionary fees for our older people, but how are our older people, who still want to learn, supposed to afford the full applicable fees? To what extent did the equality impact assessments

illustrate the effects of that withdrawal on the individual? The multiple effects of loneliness, isolation and the non-maintenance of an active and interested mind are clearly illustrated through the many different health issues, such as chronic depression and dementia, that are prevalent among older people who live in isolation.

In the three years up to the beginning of the 2007-08 financial year, there was a 37% decrease in older people's uptake of courses. Such a decrease in society participation will result only in voids in older people's daily lives. At this point, I feel that it is important to congratulate organisations, such as the Changing Ageing Partnership and U3A, the University of the Third Age, which are constant advocates of the importance of access to education and lifelong learning, regardless of age.

The benefits of social inclusion and the positive effects on health far outweigh the financial implications. If the Executive are to truly promote equality and finally banish ageism, they should reinstate concessionary fees. That would be a strong indicator that they are serious about delivering their aims and objectives. Therefore, I ask the Minister to give due consideration to the content of the motion. I have every faith that he will revisit the situation, and I look forward to the day when he informs the House that all barriers to education for older people have been removed, especially the financial barrier. I support the motion.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis seo le labhairt ar an tairiscint.

I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. I apologise for arriving late; I did not realise that the business was going through so quickly.

Further education colleges present an opportunity for many, particularly older, people to attain qualifications, better themselves, join the workforce or simply improve their quality of life. I accept that the EU directive, as my colleague Michael Brady said, is aimed primarily at preventing discrimination against people in employment and at ensuring that training providers cannot discriminate against people because of their age. That is welcome because, in the past, people have had to take cases of age discrimination to the Equality Commission.

In previous debates, the Minister referred to the unintended consequences of the legislation. One such consequence is that the issue of concessionary fees is forcing many older people to abandon non-vocational and recreational courses in further education colleges and their community out-centres. To be fair to the Minister, he has tried to deal with the problem, and, for example, people who benefit from the rates relief scheme are entitled to concessionary fees.

I agree with many other Members that the issue must be addressed and that the House will unite on it. I am sure that the Minister will comment on that.

As David Hilditch said, further education colleges adopt various approaches to concessionary fees for older people. An attempt has been made to achieve some uniformity, but the situation is patchy, and, therefore, a fees policy is probably required.

Each of the jurisdictions in England, Scotland and Wales operates a different system. Wales is trying to develop a fees policy, and the Assembly should, perhaps, consider that option. As the Minister said, the Equality Commission should re-examine the issue in response to the outcry from MLAs and the constituents who have raised the issue with them.

I accept that the Department for Employment and Learning produced the FE Means Business strategy before the Minister's time. It emphasised the importance of attaining qualifications to create a better workforce, and that was welcome. However, the strategy also mentioned the full recovery of costs for all courses provided by further education colleges. The Assembly has debated the problems faced by people with learning difficulties who want to attend college but not attain a qualification. However, older people are now taking the hit.

The development of a fees policy may be the way in which the issue can be addressed. The Minister will tell the House that further education colleges are autonomous bodies that set their own policies; however, they receive a substantial amount of taxpayers' money. The Minister should, therefore, examine a way in which a policy could deal with older people who want to attend courses.

Anna Lo and other Members said that lifelong learning, social cohesion, improvement in people's lives, health benefits and increased well-being are all important benefits of further education courses. There must be a move away from the emphasis on people not taking non-vocational or recreational courses.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I welcome the debate; it deals with issues in which I have much interest and with which I have considerable sympathy. Progress has been made in several ways; however, it has been a frustration to me that some aspects of the problem remain unsolved.

11.45 am

In reply to the Committee Chairperson's question about how many communications I had received: I have had 25 letters from Members in the two years since this issue first arose; I have responded to 10 questions for written answer; and I am on record as answering one question for oral answer.

To take the second part of the motion first, my Department and I recognise the significant value to older people of participating in further education. As well as being educationally beneficial, such participation is a more general social, health and well-being benefit, which adds to the frustration expressed by Members on all sides of the House. That is why my Department has worked so hard with FE colleges over the past 18 months or so to address some of the issues. However, it must be recognised that a number of substantial problems have yet to be overcome and that the age regulations constitute a considerable, if unfortunate, obstacle.

The first part of the motion asks me to enter into discussions with our FE colleges about:

"the options for, and legalities surrounding, the reinstatement of concessionary course fees for older people".

I have no difficulty in engaging with the colleges on issues of concessionary fees. We have been working with them over the past 18 months and will continue to do so. However, I will set out the legislative background of that for Members.

The European directive 2000/78/EC required all member states to outlaw age discrimination in jobs and vocational training by the end of 2006. OFMDFM consulted widely on that directive in 2005, and put forward proposals that became the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006, which have applied to all providers of vocational training since 1 October 2006. The European directive is implemented here in the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006, which define the policy issues from a legislative perspective.

The policy intention that underpinned the directive and the age regulations was to prohibit unjustified age discrimination in employment and vocational training. A main provision of the regulations is that providers cannot discriminate on age grounds in relation to training or access to training. Legal advice has confirmed that the regulations apply equally to vocational and non-vocational learning, which is important because older people tend to participate in college courses for recreational rather than vocational reasons. However, and unfortunately, that does not help, because all provision is covered by the regulations.

Another legal complexity is that the age regulations include an objective justification mechanism, which is quite a technical measure that time prevents my going into in great detail. However, the relevant clause allows for age discrimination in the event of a "legitimate aim" being pursued and when action taken to do so is "proportionate". In other words, it must be demonstrated that the aim is sufficiently important to justify discrimination and that there is no alternative, short of discrimination, by which to achieve that aim. I will return to that point later, because recent interpretation

of that complex mechanism in England may be worthy of further consideration here.

It must be recognised, though, that the objective justification mechanism does not remove discrimination. In effect, it provides an opportunity to justify taking discriminatory action, and we all know the importance of removing discrimination. Therefore, we should not cast aside the clause lightly.

I have frequently been asked why older people can claim free bus passes. The answer is that age regulations apply only to employment and vocational training. At present, no legislation in Great Britain or Northern Ireland prohibits age discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services. That may change for the better in the future, which is another matter that I will return to shortly.

That is the legal position and the very complicated landscape within which we are required to operate. However, in a more positive light, I will outline some of the measures that my Department and I have taken to address those issues. In doing so, I repeat my commitment to increasing access to learning and to removing whatever barriers that I can for people of all ages.

A major focus of our work has been on finding ways to minimise the impact of the age regulations on older people while being mindful of the need to comply with them. Early in 2008, my officials began discussions with senior management in further education colleges to achieve a consistent approach to the interpretation and application of the legislation and to examine how any negative impact on learners could be minimised.

As a result of those discussions, since September 2008, colleges have applied age regulations in a reasonably consistent way, although Mr Hilditch raised a number of fee anomalies. Of course, that does not mean that all colleges will charge the same fees, and we know that that is the case. As Mr Butler is aware, setting fees is a matter for each college. I do not want the Department to begin micro-managing such matters, but, equally, I accept that we are putting in large sums of money and, consequently, have some interest in policy matters.

Although colleges have stopped offering concessionary fees on the basis of age alone, they have traditionally offered concessions in a number of other ways. In particular, they offer means-tested concessions to, for example, people who are in receipt of certain benefits, such as income support, jobseeker's allowance and guaranteed pension credit. The age regulations do not stop that practice, so it continues. Again, Mr Hilditch mentioned the list of benefits that are taken into account, which I am happy to look at.

In response to the fees issue, my Department agreed with all colleges that they would extend their means test criteria to include those who are in receipt of rates relief. Rates relief is focused on older ratepayers and,

although, admittedly, it does not include all pensioners, it has the potential to increase the number of older people who may be entitled to fees concessions. It might, therefore, be appropriate for me to discuss with colleges how that concession could be accessed more easily, because some people attach a stigma to claiming rates relief.

The Department and the further education sector are looking further at the whole subject. For example, we are considering the fee structure in light of the current economic climate and part-time enrolment patterns throughout the sector. As a result, colleges have reduced some course fees, including some with respect to recreational provision, and that totally complies with age regulations. Mr Attwood mentioned the cost of addressing the matter. Although the local economic situation is difficult, the issue for us is not about cost; it is about how we comply with the regulations.

Turning to the motion, I shall identify a couple of areas — one in the short-to-medium term and one in the longer term — in which it might be possible to make some progress. In the short-to-medium term, I and my officials have been keeping in close contact with our counterparts in England on this matter. As has been mentioned, last year, I discussed the matter with Bill Rammell MP, the then Minister of State with responsibility for lifelong learning and further and higher education.

In March 2009, the Government in England published a White Paper, in which they restated their commitment to adult learning. They recognised the difficulties created by the age regulations, and they are pretty much the same in England as they are here. Specifically, the Government in England referred to the objective justification mechanism in the regulations and its potential to overcome some of the fees issues. As is the case in Northern Ireland, the White Paper emphasises that it is up to providers to make the case for objective justification, taking account of circumstances in their local area.

Subsequent to the publication of the White Paper, on 27 May 2009, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, which champions adult education in England and Wales, published a briefing note on age discrimination and adult learning fees, in which it suggests that the objective justification mechanism in the age regulations could, perhaps, be applied to socially legitimate aims as well as to legitimate aims of an economic or vocational nature. There are associated risks, because, as I said, doing that is, in effect, an attempt to justify discriminatory action. Moreover, those risks would be carried by individual colleges, which would, if legally challenged, have to justify their actions. However, it is worth exploring that avenue further, and I can confirm that my Department will examine it with colleges as a matter of urgency.

A proposed new EU anti-discrimination directive is under consideration. The draft directive was published on 2 July 2008, and member states have been engaged in negotiations with the European Commission regarding its precise content and scope. The process of agreeing the directive is unanimity by all 27 member states following consultation with the European Parliament. The Government Equalities Office has issued a UK-wide consultation document on the draft directive, and the consultation period runs from 5 May 2009 to 28 July 2009.

I inform Members about all that because the proposed directive will prohibit discrimination on a number of equality grounds, including age, in access to, and supply of, goods and services. One might think that that will only make things worse for older people because bus passes, for example, could then be treated in the same way as college fees. However, removing those types of benefits to older people would be totally unacceptable, so it is likely that the directive will include a raft of exceptions to enable justified age-differentiated services to continue. That could provide an opportunity to take a similar approach to FE provision.

It is worth noting that in advance of the European directive and separately from it, Great Britain is progressing its Equality Bill. It is likely that it will include powers to produce subordinate legislation to allow exceptions to be made to the prohibition on age discrimination. GB will consult on what age-based exceptions there should be, and it is likely that college fees could be among those that are identified. Although GB's Equality Bill will not apply to Northern Ireland, and the European directive is some way in the future, both will, I hope, give strong signals to the policy intent in that area. That will help us to come to a successful resolution later, if not sooner.

Earlier this year, I wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to explore specifically the extent to which the emerging equality legislation in Europe and closer to home could be used to help to solve the problems in that area. I wrote to them on 16 January 2009, and I received a reply 10 minutes before I came into the Chamber this morning. It is, at least, a positive reply, and it will be helpful in dealing with the matter.

Mr McCarthy: I am pretty alarmed by what I hear about EU age-discrimination legislation. We had a European election yesterday. Many issues were debated and discussed but not this matter. Does the Minister agree that it is an important aspect of European policy and that the three MEPs whom we elected yesterday should get back in there and fight our corner?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am conscious that there was a European election yesterday. The Member's point is valid. I read out a list of issues, of which there will be widespread repudiation. However, we are opening up an important discussion.

I received a response from Dame Joan Harbison, who is the advocate for older people. We will co-operate with her because the First Minister and deputy First Minister asked her to consider the issue. That is another positive step.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am running out of time, but I will give way if the Member is quick.

Mrs M Bradley: Did the Minister receive any explanation from OFMDFM for the length of time that it took to reply?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I did not, but I am glad that at least I received a reply. I have just received it, but at least we are moving in the right direction.

I share much sympathy with the Committee regarding this matter. In answer to Mr Attwood's earlier question — I know that he had to leave the Chamber — I confirm that I am prepared to revisit the legal advice; at one time, the issue was clear, but there have since been developments. Given that that is the core issue that has held us back, it is appropriate to revisit the legal advice, and I will do so. I will report to Members in due course.

I welcome the debate warmly. I thank Members for their contributions, and I assure them that the Department is taking the issue very seriously.

12.00 noon

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mr Newton): I declare an interest, as Dr Coulter did. Members had better beware that one reaches the "older person" category at the age of 50.

This is an important issue. Taking what has been said across the Chamber, it is an issue that exercises the staff of all MLAs, as people phone or visit their offices. It is not just an issue of education, but one that is about social inclusion and that stretches into matters of health, both physical and mental. It is an issue that we should all be conscious of because it has implications for society as a whole that are much wider than people attending a class on cookery, flower arranging, computing or whatever. It is an important issue for all aspects of society.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: I thank the Deputy Chairperson for giving way. I was going to ask the Minister to give way, but I was conscious of his time.

What strikes me in the overview of the debate is that everyone supports the motion and seems to want to take the objective forward. The Minister might not be able to answer my question today, but, as I said earlier, objective 2 of PSA 7 of the Programme for Government

refers to taking forward co-ordinated strategic action to promote social inclusion. Can we have more information on how the Department hopes to do that?

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: I thank the Chairperson for that point.

I agree very much with the thrust of the Chairperson's speech, which outlined the general thinking of all members of the Committee from all parties. My party colleague Iris Robinson has been exercised by the issue and has taken it up on a number of occasions.

I will summarise the debate. Mr Easton, the first Member to follow the Chairperson, made the point in his opening remarks that the issue goes to the very heart of the ambition of society to be engaged in lifelong learning. He highlighted the opportunities that the proposal presents for FE colleges — an issue that the Minister referred to as well. Dr Coulter stressed his experience of involvement in the field of education and the benefits that he has seen personally. Again, he stressed the benefits to the entire community and across the various Departments. Dr Coulter has vast experience in further education.

Alex Attwood concentrated on legal areas and asked the Minister whether the legal anomalies have been explored fully. The Minister addressed that question in his remarks. Mr Attwood also indicated that perhaps the colleges have too much freedom of action and that the Minister's Department might want to stress that it should be setting the pace. That is a question that the Minister might want to answer in the future.

Anna Lo said that most people of pensionable age who take further education classes are female. She also stressed the benefits of such classes in encouraging social contact and in improving the ability of older people to communicate, and she spoke of the opportunity that such classes give older people to communicate with relatives in Australia, for instance. It is highly desirable that people be given the opportunity to improve their technological communication skills as well as their ability to communicate face to face.

David Hilditch said that his office had received queries from older persons asking why the older student discount had been removed. Perhaps I should say that his office was "inundated" with such queries; the Minister might know from where that word comes. He also asked why there was not a level playing field, and the Minister referred to that. Many people find it difficult to understand why fees for courses at the South Eastern Regional College and the Belfast Metropolitan College, for instance, are different.

Mickey Brady said that he had been approached by older persons who had not been able to afford course fees. All Members are conscious of the affordability of fees. Mr Brady stressed that discounts are being offered in parts of England.

Mary Bradley mentioned the health benefits, and that featured in the remarks of all Members who spoke. She spoke of the importance of including all members of society in college courses, and she said that there had been a reduction in the number of older students who were registering for courses — a point that was made by several Members.

Paul Butler recognised that this is an EU issue and that the intention of the legislation is to stop discrimination against older persons; however, an unintended consequence is that there is no discount for older persons.

The Minister spoke of his frustration with the issue, and he recognised the benefit to society of further education classes. He also stressed the complex legal issues, and he spoke of his Department's willingness to do all that it can to address them. Furthermore, he said that his Department continues to have discussions about the fee structures with further education colleges. The Minister said that it is not an issue of cost to the colleges, which many of us will be pleased to hear, but a legal issue.

The Minister also referred to the work that is being done in England and to the publication of the White Paper. He also spoke about the EU directive that may, in future, provide a way out of the problem. He also informed us that he had raised some matters with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on which he had received a positive reply — belated though it was, for whatever reason.

My party colleague Alex Easton said that we need to create a win-win situation. If, due to new legislation on the matter, for instance, the Minister returns to the House to inform us that discounts will be offered to older persons engaging in courses, we will have created a win-win situation, not only for the older person in the class but for all older people. All parts of society will benefit. Regardless of whether the benefits come from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety or the Department for Social Development, the whole community will benefit, and the health concerns and loneliness that some people face will be addressed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to enter into discussions with the Regional Colleges about the options for, and legalities surrounding, the reinstatement of concessionary course fees for older people; and seeks the Minister's acknowledgement that the availability of these discounted courses provides considerable social, as well as educational, benefits to older people.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Housing Budget

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item of business in the Order Paper is the motion on the housing budget. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech, and all other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr O'Loan: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the £100 million shortfall in the housing budget; notes in particular the lack of finance available for planned maintenance and improvement works, including private sector grants; calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give top priority to housing in the forthcoming June monitoring round; calls on the Executive to recognise that investment in social housing can boost the construction sector and the wider economy at this time; and further calls on the Minister for Social Development, the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Executive to put long term measures in place to secure the financial future for housing.

I am pleased to propose the motion. I very much regret the absence of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, whom I had understood was going to be here to respond to the motion. In being absent without any explanation, he is not giving proper courtesy to the Chamber.

The essential argument of the motion is that investment in housing confers great social benefit in dealing with homelessness and, more particularly, it offers the Executive the best route available to addressing the effects of the current recession. In one sense, therefore, I am making an argument that everyone here agrees with.

In the Programme for Government, a high priority was given to the provision of social housing. That was done to address a crisis in housing. As we know, a special report was commissioned from Sir John Semple. He recommended a dramatic increase in the newbuild social housing programme to 2,000 houses a year, up from about 800 a year, which was the rate at that time. The Executive adopted that recommendation and set a target of 10,000 new social homes in five years. The Minister for Social Development made immediate plans to put that into effect, budgeting to build more than 5,000 houses in the first three years. Members will remember that her initial budget was inadequate for that task. Some told her to keep quiet and accept the money; however, she did not, and an increased budget was allocated.

We all know what has happened since then. Much of the housing budget was predicated on house sales and other property sales; those have largely vanished into thin air. Last year, the housing budget was £80

million short. By year end, through the monitoring rounds and diverting Department for Social Development (DSD) funding, that was brought down to about £35 million, but that left many projects unfunded. It also created great uncertainty throughout the year, as building and maintenance firms did not know whether funding was coming. That crisis continued to the year end, as many Members will know from their having been approached by constituents who have such firms and businesses.

Officials from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) have told the Committee:

"In terms of the actual delivery...the only significant problem area in this financial year has been in respect of social housing".

They were referring to the 2008-09 financial year. That is a remarkable statement. If one considers the many pressures in that year, including the loss of an anticipated £175 million from Workplace 2010 and the need to finance slurry tanks on farms as a result of the nitrates directive, it seems that housing was not given the same relief as other schemes. According to DFP, the single major capital scheme that did not receive its quota of funding was social housing.

This year, the deficit is £100 million. There are 1,750 projected housing starts this year. That is the highest for many years, and the Department for Social Development and its Minister need to be given due credit for that. The heaviest pressure is on maintenance and private sector grants. Major improvement schemes have been deferred, affecting some 850 homes. Single element schemes, such as heating and kitchens, and so on, have been severely reduced.

Many economists have argued that putting more money into housing, particularly the house building sector, is the most effective intervention that can be made by Government to counteract—

Ms J McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: I will give way, although I feel that I can anticipate the Member's comments.

Ms J McCann: Does the Member agree that it would be beneficial if the Minister were to open up discussions with the credit union movement, the Treasury and the Executive to see whether there is some way that the credit union moneys could be released to help in the social housing budget?

12.15 pm

Mr O'Loan: The Member will know that the SDLP published a substantial paper recently that outlined many measures for generating more funds that could then be used in a number of areas, including the housing sector. The SDLP is interested in discussing all possibilities, including the Member's proposal. I do not know how practical it would be to gain access to

credit union moneys, but we are certainly open to discussing the matter.

I referred to the general support from economists for investing money in house building, and DSD and the University of Ulster published an important paper this week that was written by Mike Smyth and Dr Mark Bailey. That paper argues that there is a greater multiplier for that form of investment through supplies purchased and the spending of incomes than for any other form of investment. That is a very strong and important statement. Specifically, they calculate that for every 10 jobs that are created directly, a further seven will be sustained elsewhere in the economy. They say that that applies both to direct house building and maintenance programmes.

A further factor is that housing programmes give very good value for money. Material costs have dropped by as much as 17%, and we all know that labour costs have dropped dramatically. That means that we can get more for our pound now than we could have in recent years. There is also the desirability of maintaining skills and employment in Northern Ireland, including having a flow of apprentices. The Ulster Bank's quarterly economic review shares the opinion that is outlined in the paper. It states:

"Efforts by the Executive to stimulate this sector will have the largest impact on reducing unemployment."

Of course, there are sound social reasons for investing in housing. Homelessness has increased in recent years, at a time when it was decreasing dramatically in England. With unemployment and repossessions on the increase, homelessness will almost inevitably rise as well. We continue to have serious problems with overcrowding and with poor housing conditions. The House Condition Survey 2006 found 3.4% of houses, that is, one in every 30, to be unfit. One third of those houses are owner-occupied, hence the importance of improvement grants, which have been cut drastically. The connection between poor housing and poor health is known. There is now a major emphasis on public health. If we are serious about public health, we must ensure that the house improvement budget is guaranteed.

I turn to the plight of the contractors who do the one-off maintenance work on heating and kitchens, that is, the so-called Egan contractors. Those firms invested heavily and took on workers after getting firm commitments from the Housing Executive, but they are now reduced to a hand-to-mouth existence and are subject to the vagaries of monitoring rounds. That is no way to plan the maintenance of our housing stock or to get firms to work strategically.

I am at a loss to understand the Minister's position on the matter, because I think that he says contradictory things. In a letter to the DSD Minister in January 2009,

he said that he believed that there is a way through the current financial difficulties. He recognised:

"they risk having a materially disproportionate and undesirable impact on the local construction industry."

I appreciate that stance, yet in a response to a question for written answer that I asked about the risks to the delivery of this year's capital programme, he dumped the problem entirely on individual Departments. There was no sense of collective responsibility or of leadership from the Finance Minister. Again, I regret that the Minister is not here to answer that point. It is very disappointing and unnecessary, and it is not what people expect or want from the Assembly.

I want to relate the issue to yesterday's election results. The two issues might seem to be very different, but I see a close connection between them. The DUP took a substantial hit yesterday. Jim Allister and the TUV did very well, and we know that he is bitterly anti-agreement. The DUP could react to that by becoming more anti-agreement itself and by pulling away from partnership and any attempt to work towards consensus. That would be another colossal strategic failure for unionism.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Has the Member not wandered from the subject of the motion, which he is prone to do in the House? What is the relevance of what he is talking about now?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to stick to the motion.

Mr O'Loan: I am sticking to the point; I said that I would make the connection, and I will now do so. The right response to yesterday's election results is to make the institutions work better for the people and to take the argument to them that the Assembly is delivering for them. The motion is as good a place as any to start on that work. I say to the Minister in his absence: adopt the problem of the housing budget as a collective Executive issue and work out a strategic solution, not just for this year, but, as the motion proposes, for the future.

I wonder whether there is some hope that thinking is changing in the Minister's Department. At the Committee meeting on 27 May, one of his officials said:

"The Executive could agree to a pro rata reduction in departmental allocations and make money available for addressing other pressures."

That was one of a number of comments made by departmental officials recently that indicate that there are thoughts about altering and rewriting the Budget. That is not the right way to go about it: it is not the new Budget that we have sought, nor would it be as effective as the new proposals that the SDLP put forward in its recent substantial paper. However, it may be the beginning of the change that I am asking for in the motion. I ask the Assembly for its support.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr David Simpson, Chairperson of the Social Committee.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Simpson): Thank you, Mr Deputy Chair; we almost got it right. I apologise for arriving late. I was attending another meeting.

The challenges that face the housing budget are well known and will, undoubtedly, be well articulated today. They have been articulated already, but whether they have been well articulated is a different story. In acknowledging those challenges, the Committee for Social Development has carefully considered the new housing agenda and its ambitious and welcome targets for new social homes. The Committee has also considered other housing-related programmes, which are ambitious and have equally welcome targets, including bringing more houses up to the decent homes standard.

All those programmes and their targets, and the ambitions behind them, are a recognition of the key role that better housing plays in our society. All sides of the House accept that creating more and better social housing has a positive and profound effect on the individual families and communities that benefit directly. We would all concede that the benefits of social housing programmes are keenly felt in the construction and related industries.

The funding of programmes for the building and refurbishment of social homes is based on expected receipts from land and some house sales. As Members know, the Northern Ireland property market has undergone a very bad decline. The majority of Committee members agree that the inevitable consequence of that decline has been a reduction in available resources for social housing. As everyone knows, times are tough, budgets are tight and hard decisions are required.

Mr F McCann: The theme of the debate is maintenance, Egan contracts and replacements. As for urban regeneration, a contract on the Royal Exchange has been delayed, and there is £110 million available in the budget. Does the Member agree that if that £110 million were moved across by the Minister, it would deal with the problems that we face?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: Yes, I take that on board. I got briefed on that only this morning, and I have been told that the new date could be September or October. Yes, £110 million is available, and there is the possibility that it could be used to offset the shortfall in social housing. The Committee will look at that at its meeting on Thursday, when it will reach a conclusion.

Times are difficult, and there is the unrelenting pressure of homelessness and housing stress. Undoubtedly, there are economic benefits in investing in new houses or housing refurbishment and maintenance. On the

other hand, the Executive face the requirement — as does every householder in Northern Ireland — to do the best that they can with a very difficult budget.

In relation to the housing budget, I have a letter written by the Finance Minister that states:

“I have met with the Social Development Minister to consider the options that might be explored in what remains a very difficult economic and public expenditure environment. To help alleviate the pressures on the DSD budget resulting from a very significant shortfall in anticipated receipts I have provided £20 million in additional funding to DSD over recent monitoring rounds and have supported in the February monitoring round a reallocation by DSD of £10.5 million to housing.”

What has happened to that £30-odd million that was allocated to DSD? What priorities did it fund? The handling of the DSD budget is a major issue; therefore, the Minister should look at how that has been handled and the priorities on which it has been spent. That might alleviate difficulties not only in the housing budget but with the Egan contractors as regards the maintenance and renovation of homes —

Mr O’Loan: Will the Member give way?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: No, I will not give way, because I am almost finished.

Many families have been waiting on contractors to carry out renovations to their homes; however, that work has been suspended.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle agus a chairde. All parties in the Chamber have fully supported calls for additional resources to be given to social housing provision in the past. In fact, in many previous monitoring rounds, tens of millions of pounds have been awarded to the Minister for Social Development to deliver an effective social housing programme. However, the Members who tabled the motion would have us believe that the Executive have given little money to pad out the housing budget over the past two years.

In February 2008, after more than £200 million of additional money had been given to the Minister —

Mr O’Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: I am sorry; I have a lot to say.

She stood in the Chamber and said that she now had what she needed to deliver her programme. In the past year, more resources have been given to housing, and we fully supported that to ensure that all aspects of the housing programme were delivered fully. The Assembly even supported the Minister after she raided the social security budget by moving money to the social housing budget.

In December 2008, the Minister gave back £50 million from the social security budget, resulting in the building of two new social security offices being suspended. Those

projects would have provided much-needed work for the construction industry. However, the Department for Social Development lost that money when —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: No thanks.

The Department for Social Development lost that money when it gave it back to the Executive for redistribution among other Departments. In the December monitoring round, the Minister tried to move £4 million from the neighbourhood renewal programme, which was set up to deliver resources to those most in need in society, to the housing budget. However, that money also was lost when it went back into the central pot.

In October 2008, the Housing Executive told all Egan contractors who fit kitchens that they should be ready to start major replacements — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members that all remarks should be made through the Chair.

Mr F McCann: Many of those kitchen replacements were required on the grounds of health and safety. Some weeks later, on 18 December 2008, the Housing Executive informed the contractors that those replacements would not go ahead due to a lack of funding. We still do not know what happened in the intervening weeks, other than that the Minister made her smash-and-grab statement on 15 December. However, we know that DSD, the Housing Executive and the SDLP advised people to complain to the DUP and Sinn Féin about the lack of any resources from the December monitoring round.

In January 2008, the Housing Executive sent an instruction to cease all maintenance and change-of-tenancy repairs. That left hundreds of people who were allocated houses unable to move in, because repairs could not be carried out to their homes, and that upset many people. In February 2008, we were told that no money existed to complete 400 of the housing programmes for that financial year but that those would be completed in this year's programme.

In April 2009, Egan contractors were again informed that £10 million would be allocated for replacements. When contractors took on Egan contracts, they were advised to anticipate a roll out of 4,500 kitchen replacements and 9,500 houses for external maintenance.

I understand that many of those contractors will find themselves without work after June and that they will begin to lay off many workers. That could result in more than 800 workers losing their jobs, not to mention the implications for suppliers of materials and for local shops that will be denied the income that workers would have spent. That is yet another blow to the construction industry. Those workers have been at pains to point out that their sector provides an essential service. Many

people's kitchens have not been replaced for more than 25 years and are deteriorating.

The cyclical maintenance programme must also continue. Not to proceed with that work is short-sighted and will cost more in the long run.

12.30 pm

In his pre-Budget report of November 2008, the British Chancellor declared that the upgrading of public authority housing to meet the decent homes standard should be prioritised to maintain employment in that section of the construction industry. On 26 March 2009, the Minister for Social Development said that she would rather put a roof over people's heads than provide kitchens. However, she forgets that people in social housing pay rent and, as such, are entitled to continued maintenance and replacements, in line with their tenancy agreements.

More recently, another disaster has befallen the construction industry with the suspension of the design and build packages as a result of legal action in Europe. That will impact on many hundreds of construction workers, small builders and developers, all of whom rely on that work. Furthermore, it has been said that little information was provided to those small businesses that believed that the contracts were ongoing, only to discover that they were suspended. The Minister must make a statement to the House and explain what she is doing to assist —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr F McCann: The Minister must explain what she is doing to assist those people, and what legal advice she has received. In its statement, the SDLP said that investment in social housing can boost the construction industry.

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

Mr McNarry: Spending Government money on the creation of jobs and on the realisation of projects, such as housing, seems a desirable way in which to proceed. However, to do so would require a reprioritising of that sacred cow, the Programme for Government. According to the DUP, amending that programme is impossible because it is perfect. Some of us, however, suspect that the real reasons behind that rigid and inflexible attitude is the control freakery that so characterises the DUP and Sinn Féin leaderships. Those leaderships cannot agree on how to reprioritise the Programme for Government, and that has resulted in political sterility, with 81% of the Assembly's time being taken up with private Members' motions, which, as we know, are not binding on Ministers, and only 18% of our time used to debate Government business.

What did the DUP blame for the demise of its vote and for its failure to reach the quota yesterday? Was it

not something pathetic such as it had been too busy in Government? Where is the evidence that it has been too busy in Government? What may be closer to the truth is that that party has been too busy eating out at the taxpayer's expense, purchasing six or seven tables and looking after two homes, never mind double- and triple-jobbing —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should resume his seat. As I have already said, the motion under debate concerns housing.

The Member may now continue

Mr McNarry: I accept what you say, Mr Deputy Speaker. However, we have heard nothing today about housing, and there will be no ministerial response to the debate. Instead, all the House has heard is talk of a hokey-pokey shuffle, without the electorate's being allowed to choose. That shuffle means that MLAs who are also MPs can remain at Westminster but cannot stay here. It is a kind of cull. The issue of housing has been sent to the back of that internal cull to protect the salaries, pensions and perks that have been taken for so many years at Westminster.

If the DUP is not interested in housing — the issue that the House is debating today and of which the Deputy Speaker has reminded me — let it go to the electorate. Let the electorate choose and give that party its verdict on who stays or goes from this or any other place. Let the electorate also give that party its verdict on housing. Let the DUP give the people another opportunity, as it did yesterday, to tell that party that the game is up.

There is a sound case for housing's being afforded a higher priority in the Programme for Government. Most of us can see the win-win nature of providing more social housing and not falling short of targets, as we undoubtedly are. In the process of doing so, we can provide more construction jobs and help offset the alarming rise in unemployment in that sector. Housing is a priority, yet others do not seem to recognise that fact.

We should have had such debates earlier. It must be difficult for treble-jobbers to understand the plight of unemployed people and people whose jobs are threatened. How could anyone with two homes empathise with people who suffer the consequences of a financial shortfall for housing? How could they see the consequences? Therefore, decisive decision-making must improve the turnaround time in implementing decisions in an Executive that does not function properly.

On 29 May 2009, it emerged that the UK Government's much-heralded £285 million mortgage rescue scheme had helped only two homeowners in its first four months of operation, despite having 4,202 applications for help. In a nutshell, that is an indication of what the motion is about. It was taking up to five months to process a claim. That is all the more reason for us to

move towards making those decisions, instead of burying our heads in the sand and pretending that the real issues that face us on housing and on everything else will somehow disappear. They will not disappear; the electorate said so yesterday, and will say so again at the soonest opportunity.

Until we prioritise the Programme for Government, we are going nowhere, and we are letting our people down.

Ms Lo: I support the motion. A serious debate on the issue is urgently required. As the proposer of the motion said, a shortfall of £100 million for this year and next year exists because of the dramatic fall in receipts from land and house sales. DSD's capital receipts have been worse hit than all the Departments. DSD has been dependent on bids in the quarterly monitoring rounds to make up its programme deficits. Depending on short-term firefighting measures without any long-term planning is poor practice, and, surely, is no way to run a Department.

The Committee for Social Development has heard from the Egan contractors, and Mr Fra McCann also mentioned that. The Egan contractors were responsible for maintenance, with the anticipation that the annual spend would be approximately £40 million. Contracts started to roll out in July 2008, but, in December 2008, the contractors were told that there would not be any starts in January 2009. The Minister of Finance and Personnel then agreed to provide additional funding, and the contractors were told in January 2009 that they had to spend the £10 million in less than three months to the end of March. They were paying staff overtime to do the work to spend that £10 million. Surely, that is not the way to run a Department.

Mrs D Kelly: The Member is quite right: the Department for Social Development should be properly funded and resourced. Does the Member share my concerns that it seems that the DUP and Sinn Féin are punishing the Minister for Social Development because she stood up to them on a wide range of issues in the Executive?

Ms Lo: We all need to work together as a joined-up Government; infighting does not help anyone.

The Egan contractors paid staff overtime, and their staff had no work to do in April. That is a wasteful way of working; it is ridiculous. Instead of the Egan contractors' budget being ring-fenced at £40 million, it was reduced to £10 million. It is difficult for the construction industry to work to budgets that swing so much in a short period.

Planned maintenance is important if we are to keep the housing stock in good shape and to prevent houses from falling out of use. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has a responsibility to tenants who pay rent every month to keep up maintenance.

However, 40,000 people are still on the Housing Executive waiting list. Undoubtedly, there is a huge need for more social housing. The Minister of Finance and Personnel's press release of 23 April 2009 stated that the Government are on course to deliver the public service agreement target of 10,000 social and affordable houses by 2013: that is, 2,000 units a year. Last year, the housing budget had a shortfall of £32 million, and only 1,100 new starts were completed. There was a shortfall of 364 units. This year, it is planned that the Housing Executive should commence 1,765 newbuilds and catch up with last year's shortfall. That is a total of 2,000 newbuilds with a £100 million shortfall. One does not need to be a rocket scientist to know that the Housing Executive will be unable to do that. It is unrealistic, and we desperately need a short-term injection of cash from the June monitoring round. More importantly, the Department needs to take long-term measures to secure a sound financial footing for the Housing Executive.

It is important that housing is prioritised. As Members said, construction of newbuilds and maintenance work will help the economy. It will maintain jobs in the construction sector and in allied industries.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. By leave of the Assembly, I propose to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The next Member to speak will be Mr David Hilditch.

The sitting was suspended at 12.42 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Mr Hilditch: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion.

The Minister for Social Development and her Department seem to be under the impression that the members of the Executive, particularly the Minister of Finance and Personnel, do not support her proposals for investment in social housing. That is simply untrue. As I look around the Chamber, I can see that, from all Benches, there is support and a desire to help to solve the problem. My party and I are keen to do as much as we possibly can on housing. It is a matter of record that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has already prioritised housing in previous monitoring rounds. At some stage, the penny must drop.

Members are all aware of the current economic climate and of competing priorities. As Members from all parties table their private motions, there must be a realisation of from where resources come. The Minister of Finance and Personnel must have the freedom to choose which priority is most deserving. I remind the Members who tabled the motion that other Departments have received much less in previous monitoring rounds.

Members are all aware that sales of social housing have dropped dramatically. However, it is unfair to say that that crisis appeared simply because of the global economic downturn. Although there is no doubt that it has had a significant impact on the housing market, we cannot simply blame the economic downturn for every financial shortfall.

It is time for the Department for Social Development to look at ways in which to try to alleviate its in-house problems and to review its policies, particularly on financial management and contractual matters. Other Members have mentioned the unacceptable way in which some matters have been handled, with Egan schemes being cited as a main example.

The Minister has committed herself in making housing her number one priority. I ask what exactly her Department has done with its budget to redirect funding to provide extra social housing rather than for her simply to pass the blame on to the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Again, Members have given glaring examples, which can be studied in the Hansard report.

Although the Department for Social Development has, I believe, tried to put housing at the top of its agenda, if it is to succeed in the current economic climate, it must make serious adjustments and amendments in order to eradicate the waiting list of those in housing stress, on which there are 20,000 people. Housing stock must be maintained, refurbished and improved, regardless of the economic downturn. The Minister and her Department must find ways in

which to do that rather than blame the Department of Finance and Personnel.

I look forward to the Minister's approval of the social housing programme for 2009-2010, which, it is to be hoped, will put housing on a secure footing and will have a positive impact on the economy, particularly on the construction industry. Given the delays with the plan, which revolve around procurement, it might be best to defer it and to put extra resources into decent homes and Egan schemes, the immediate spin-off of which would be economic activity.

Mr Craig: The debate centres on the £100 million shortfall in the housing budget. It is one of those stories that ask whether there is ever enough money in any budget. Even on a personal level, does anyone ever have enough money to spend on what he or she wants? The answer is always no. The same is true of DSD. There will never, ever be enough money to spend on public housing. There will never be enough money to spend on what the Assembly wants.

Mr O'Loan: I wonder whether the Member will accept that he is not expressing the situation accurately. When he says that there is not enough money in anyone's budget, and that everyone wants more money, he makes a valid point. However, the fact is that a three-year budget was allocated to DSD, of which a substantial section was intended for housing. That money was not realised. That is quite different to every Department's saying that it wants more money in its budget. Does the Member accept that point?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have a minute added to his time.

Mr Craig: Any Member can put his or her own spin on the matter, but there are facts. The reality check for DSD, as there is for every other Department, is that budget allocations are flexible.

Certain people in the Chamber have criticised the whole Executive's inflexible approach to the Budget and their reluctance to change it to adapt to circumstances. Changes have been made to that Budget. The real criticism in the debate is that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has failed to allocate money to housing. The history speaks for itself: £20 million has been reallocated to the housing budget. If £100 million is missing, to where did that £20 million disappear? Moreover, the Minister of Finance and Personnel reallocated another £10.5 million to the housing budget. Where has that money gone? Is the figure now £70 million? Is it still £100 million? Is it £200 million? So many figures have been floated about as regards the housing budget.

The motion also states that the shortfall is causing major harm and concern and is reducing the maintenance budget for housing. That is an interesting issue. It was brought to my attention that there is a serious issue

about a maintenance budget for housing; none of us will deny that. Letters have been sent out throughout the Province to residents who had expected schemes to be conducted for health and safety reasons.

I know of two examples from areas in my constituency, one of which was visited by the Minister for Social Development last week. She saw, at first hand, the ongoing problems in Hillhall. Houses have been built on top of garages where cars are parked, which has increased the risk of fires. A scheme that was intended to redevelop the area has been cancelled for the fourth year in a row.

The Minister was taken into a pensioner's bungalow —

Mr F McCann: One theme of the debate is to create work for the construction industry. However, almost one third of properties, such as the Curzon cinema on the Ormeau Road, that were used in the 2007-08 newbuild project were bought in the open market or from developers.

Mr Craig: I concur with the Member, and I will address those issues in a moment.

The Minister was taken into a pensioner's bungalow, where she was shown a kitchen ceiling that had collapsed several months previously. However, the Housing Executive refuses to repair the ceiling because it does not have sufficient funds. It is waiting for a scheme, which was cut this year, to be implemented.

Furthermore, people have been moved out of the Dales flats in Seymour Hill because of health and safety concerns that arose from mould growth due to the lack of ventilation in the flats. A major £5.5 million scheme was cancelled this year.

If the issue was merely about a shortfall in budgets, I would speak to the Minister of Finance and Personnel. However, in reality, the Minister for Social Development made decisions that caused the shortfall in the maintenance budget. The Housing Executive gave her options, one of which was to select a budget that balanced maintenance and newbuild matters. She opted for newbuild only and left everyone else to straggle and to struggle with maintenance problems in existing housing. That is the problem. The Minister for Social Development needs to sort that out, not the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

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

Mr Craig: When Ministers make choices, they must realise that there is no wonderful pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. If Departments want another £100 million, from whose budget will it be stripped?

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I apologise to Members for not being present in the Chamber at the beginning of the debate; I was at other meetings.

I support the motion, and all Members agree that there has been a dramatic fall in house sales, with a consequential shortfall in the social housing budget.

That shortfall in capital receipts is down to a virtual cessation in Housing Executive house sales. Its total house sales revenue was only £6 million this year, compared with more than £100 million two years ago, and we must acknowledge that. There has also been a dramatic drop in receipts from land sales.

As a result, the social housing budget is under stress, but it is not simply about money. The impact of the social housing shortage is felt most acutely in communities that are suffering the greatest disadvantage, as families and first-time buyers can no longer afford mortgages. It is important to give those people hope. We have a responsibility to them, but, most important of all, we have a responsibility not to play politics with the issue or with people's hopes. Unfortunately, some parties here are playing politics with the issue today.

In a recent publication, the SDLP talked about how £400 million could be redirected to address pressing issues such as social housing. However, in allocating that £400 million, the SDLP did not allow for the equal pay claims of underpaid civil servants or for the deferral of water charges, which would cost approximately £100 million and £200 million respectively, while saying that it supports both. The SDLP's notion that the Belfast Harbour Commissioners could simply reallocate £30 million to the Titanic signature project was not based on any realistic assessment of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners' commitment to that project; the SDLP was simply looking for a cheap headline while pretending that it had something new to say. However, there was nothing new in what was said.

Even this year, when the Minister for Social Development proposed a fuel poverty payment, she was quite happy to exclude all pensioners from the scheme. It was only because other Ministers, particularly the deputy First Minister, to whom I give credit and congratulations, intervened and increased the number of people who were eligible for that payment from 65,000 to 150,000. The SDLP seems to believe that there is a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. We all know, of course, that there is not. The notion of constantly re-spending the same money reflects the SDLP's political opportunism and the way in which it plays politics with people's lives.

In seeking to address the issue realistically, the Executive must support their priority to fund social housing. Monitoring rounds and reallocations are appreciated and gladly accepted by Ministers who struggle with the limitations of their budgets. However, it is also important that in seeking additional resources, Ministers can spend what they have demanded. Unfortunately, in the case of the SDLP Minister for

Social Development, that has not always been so; in the December monitoring round, Margaret Ritchie returned £38.7 million of her budget. This is the Minister who said that if she was given the money, she would build the houses. She was given money for neighbourhood renewal, among other demands, and she gave it back.

The Executive made it clear that social housing continues to be a priority. It is unfortunate that the Minister for Social Development is not here to respond to the debate. Money will have to be found to tackle such a vital issue, and I hope that the Minister finds the competence to deal with her budget effectively.

We must also recognise that the global economic downturn is having a negative effect on Departments and on the services that they provide. As such, it is likely that all Departments will seek additional funding to address pressing issues, which, in many cases, represent front line services. We must be careful that in trying to address one issue we do not have a negative effect on other front line services.

I would like the Minister to make proposals for targeted interventions in areas of greatest need, particularly in north and west Belfast, the north-west and Derry. I ask the Minister to inspire confidence by showing that she can manage her budget better than she has done thus far. I support the motion.

Mr Beggs: My colleagues and I are happy to support the SDLP motion. The housing budget appears to be well short of what is required to meet the needs for which the Department for Social Development is responsible. There is little point in criticising a Minister or a Department without giving them the necessary resources, whether through a monitoring round or by reprogramming budgets.

2.15 pm

The motion refers to the housing budget as being important to the general economy, particularly at the moment. It is accepted widely that housing can be a key mover in the local economy. It is incumbent on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to consider those benefits when making his quarterly monitoring round decisions.

I note, as have others, the recent work of Mike Smyth and Dr Mark Bailey of the University of Ulster, suggesting that housing projects produce a local economic multiplier effect, creating local employment opportunities and maintaining investment in the local and regional economy. A local economic multiplier effect encompasses further economic activity, which is associated with additional local income, local supplier purchases, and long-term development effects. In England, the same effect has been recognised by the fact that £600 million on top of existing budgets has been invested to stimulate housing development.

I question Gordon Brown's reduction in VAT across the board. What benefit is there to the economy if people get a reduction in the price of their flat-screen televisions, which may be manufactured elsewhere? It is important that funding be targeted to areas that would benefit local employees.

The First Minister is very good at telling us that given that the Programme for Government is designed to put the economy first, it should not be rewritten. Indeed, he felt fit to get angry at a member of the press who took him up on that issue.

The actions that both DUP Ministers of Finance have taken in this devolved Assembly show their inability to adapt the Budget to changing circumstances. The motion highlights rightly that more money for the housing budget would mean more money for the contractors who are employed to carry out the work that is involved. That would mean more money for the employment of builders, plumbers, electricians and other tradesmen, many of whom have been laid off because of the decline in house building.

Although I question the actions of the Department of Finance and Personnel, it must be said that the Department for Social Development also has questions to answer. It appears to be handing back a lot of money in monitoring rounds. Are the Department and the Minister doing everything possible to minimise underspends in the Department? What assistance has the Minister and her Department received from the Department of Finance and Personnel on the issue? Should more of the money that has been returned centrally be passed back with the authority to spend it on other budget headings where it is clear that money can be spent? Those questions have to be answered.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office released a report recently stating that the Housing Executive is keeping to its accounting targets of reducing the amount of rent arrears by simply writing off large amounts of debt, which is some £10.6 million. Is that the best use of public money?

However, I do not wish to give the impression that the Minister for Social Development is responsible for the hole in the housing budget; clearly, she is not, and we accept that. The new Labour recession is affecting public finances across the UK. Given that her budget is so reliant on the capital value of lands and capital receipts, it is clear that her Department was always going to suffer the most from the downturn. I understand that last year, her Department was budgeting for some £80 million of receipt income. A press release that the Department issued in January 2009 indicated that some £8 million was being forecast at that time, meaning that there was a huge shortfall.

It is up to the Department of Finance and Personnel to show how best to serve the people of Northern Ireland by adjusting for such changes in the Budget.

The two main parties who control the Executive both claim that one stops the other from having an issue added to the agenda, but it is up to them to change anything that they wish, if there is a will to do so. There is little point in their criticising others when it is in their gift to make those changes. The electorate showed their disgust of the current situation through the low turnout for the European elections.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Beggs: We must now start to address meaningfully the housing problem facing Northern Ireland, rather than merely bury our heads in the sand. I support the motion.

Mr Attwood: The motion makes two essential political and practical points. The first is to give top priority to housing in the June monitoring rounds, and the second is to put long-term measures in place to secure the financial future for housing.

The first question — how to give top priority to housing in June monitoring — has been explored in a false and erroneous way by the people from Sinn Féin. Why do I say that? The Member for West Belfast Fra McCann, who is known around this Building as “I will ask others to give way but I will not give way myself”, was asked to give way three times by SDLP Members who wanted to make the point that the Minister for Social Development has not returned a penny farthing of her housing budget in monitoring returns.

Instead, as Mr Beggs said, in the December monitoring returns, the Minister asked that non-housing moneys of £38 million should be approved for housing by the Executive and the Minister of Finance and Personnel. The Minister of Finance and Personnel, backed by the Sinn Féin Ministers, refused to do that. Therefore, £38 million of non-housing moneys that could have been used for housing in December was blocked by Sinn Féin. Those are the hard facts.

Mr F McCann: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Member is not reflecting in an accurate way. Was there not also £50 million moved from the social security capital budget across into —

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not an appropriate point of order.

Mr Attwood: I thank Mr McCann for once again proving that, although he asks others to give way, he does not give way himself; he refused to give way three times during his contribution.

The irony and inconsistency of all that, welcome though it is, is that an hour ago in the Chamber, Sinn Féin changed its mind about what should happen with DSD moneys. Sinn Féin announced that if there were £110 million of unspent moneys in the DSD budget due to the Royal Exchange project not going ahead, it would back a reallocation of that money for housing

by the Finance Minister. Will Sinn Féin explain why it blocked the very same proposal from the Minister in December?

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a minute.

Six months later, when the Minister has won the public and political argument about housing need in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin changes its mind.

I welcome the fact that the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, who was apparently speaking in his capacity as Chairperson but sounded very like a DUP MLA, also indicated broad support for that principle. I hope that the Finance Minister is listening to Sinn Féin, the DUP Chairperson of the Social Development Committee and the SDLP motion. We are all telling him that in the monitoring rounds he should reallocate unspent non-housing moneys for housing need.

Jonathan Craig simply does not get the second point that the motion makes. Housing is essential to the construction industry in the North for a short-term bounce in a recession and a longer-term uplift in the quality of people's lives. Therefore, money for housing should be ring-fenced so that there is never a doubt in the next Assembly —

Mr Craig: I thank the Member for giving way, because, unlike other Members, I do give way.

Does the Member not agree that it is inappropriate to cut the entire maintenance budget in order to create new housing? It puts 750 jobs in the construction industry at risk. That is an unacceptable way to manage a budget. We cannot keep building new roofs over our heads and allow existing housing to fall into complete disrepair and then also have to be replaced.

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr Attwood: If the DUP's Minister had agreed to the SDLP Minister's request in December to reallocate the £38 million, the Member would not have had the nerve to say:

"the Minister for Social Development made decisions that caused the shortfall in the maintenance budget."

She did not: the recession did.

Martina Anderson spoke about the lack of receipts. When that issue came home to roost, the Minister asked for a way out, and the Department of Finance and Personnel and Sinn Féin blocked it. This month, we must not repeat the error of December. This month, the Finance Minister needs to live up to his commitment in a letter to the Minister for Social Development on January 9 that, in the current financial difficulties, he accepts that the loss of expected receipts from the sale of land and houses risks having a materially

disproportionate and undesirable effect on the local construction industry.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Attwood: We need to put housing on a secure and stable footing for this year, for the next two years, and for the four years after that.

Mr Shannon: I do not think that there is a Member in the Chamber who does not have an issue concerning the Housing Executive. Every day, we get complaints; every day, we hear concerns; every day, we are asked to help in allocating a house. That is how it is in my constituency office, as it is in everyone else's.

Nor is it just about the allocation of houses, it is about repairs, contracts and renovations. The work is done, but not, perhaps, always to the appropriate standard. Just yesterday, a lady came to my office about work to her house that had almost caused her an injury. There are too many horror stories; a change is needed. There is a major problem with housing provision and upkeep, and that must be addressed and action taken.

Aa' shoart whiel ago, Aa' scrivven a letter tae tha Mannyistar tae pit fort mi' worries aboot tha reducing o' grants mony that haud bin sut asied fer tha Hoosin Executiv in tha Proavince, an in pertikular tae tha Airdes hoosin. Tha manager fer tha Airdes area noo is Owen Brady, an he daes a reel guid joab wi' tha mony that bin putt aside fer him, but whut is mare than cleer is that ther isnae enough mony fer tae dae aw tha woark that is needit

Tha Mannyistar is weel awor o' tha social hoosin needs in tha Airdes. She kens that better than maist fowk an it is sae impoartan that fowk shud stae in ther haems an kerri oot repaers tae manage wi' ther needs instead o' movin bakk oan tae tha hoosin list, whiel repaers er kerri oot, an endin up wi' oot ocht fer a unshair amount o' tiem.

Recently, I wrote to the Minister expressing concern about the reduction of grants money that had been allocated to Housing Executive district offices, particularly the Ards district. Owen Brady, district manager for the Ards area, does a fantastic job with the money that has been allocated. However, it is abundantly clear that there is not enough to do the work that is needed.

The Minister knows better than most the social housing needs in the Ards. It is imperative for people to stay in their homes and to renovate to cope with their needs rather than move back onto the housing list and flounder for who knows how long. I urged the Minister to ensure that the 1,500 new homes that are needed are provided. Strangford, which I represent, has its allocation of those. Indeed, I would be happy to see all 1,500 homes built in Strangford, and I know

that my colleague Iris Robinson feels the same. However, that would hardly be fair to everyone else in the Province.

There are almost 2,000 people on the priority housing list in the Ards district and about 1,000 on the ordinary waiting list; that shows that social housing need in the Ards continues to grow. The growth is such that it would take 300 newbuilds this year alone to address its housing needs, and that does not take into account those who come onto the list in the meantime.

Stephen Graham, Housing Executive manager for the Ards area, told me in response to a question that 200 houses are to be built this year with various housing associations, including Habinteg Housing Association (Ulster) Ltd and Helm Housing, for the years 2009-2010 and 2010-11. However, I told him that the need is there now. He replied that the Housing Executive was agreeing to 70 off-the-shelf purchases that could be built this year to address the core of housing need immediately.

While all that is happening, we have a change — and I talked to the Minister about this — in the way in which houses are built, whether design-and-build or other options, and we now find that there are legal issues. I spoke to the Minister, and I know that she, too, is unhappy that houses cannot be built as they once were. Even in the area that I represent there is great housing need, but schemes have not been given the go-ahead.

2.30 pm

Concentrated newbuild programmes need to be undertaken every year. That is the only measure that will reduce the social housing list, and the Minister can bring it about. We need to boost the construction industry because that would boost the economy, create jobs and put money back into people's pockets.

The Housing Executive manager in my area does the best that he can with his available budget, but, unfortunately, he is not given enough funds to meet the needs of the community. The Minister should allocate more funding to the newbuild process. Creating a strategy will immediately benefit many sections of the community by providing housing, maintenance and upkeep.

It is a big job, and there are no easy answers, but the Minister for Social Development has the necessary willpower to make a difference. I ask her to address the escalating problem with wisdom and to work cross-departmentally to find a solution.

Mr Burns: I support the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue once again. I am slightly discouraged by the fact that we continually have to debate the topic because little action has been taken to address the massive shortfall in the social housing budget. Every Member knows about the £100 million black hole in the housing budget, which is a direct result of the fall in the value of the Department

for Social Development's assets and the sale of those assets. It is obvious that the Department for Social Development, a spending Department, does not have enough money.

The Minister has done her best to make savings, but there is no way that she will be able to make up for such a shortfall in the existing financial package. That is why the SDLP feels that the housing budget should be given top priority in the next monitoring round. Any handouts in June will represent only a short-term measure: they will not be enough.

The SDLP has long called for a complete review of the Budget and the Programme for Government. The world is a very different place from what it was when the Budget was originally set, and the global economic crisis has hit every country hard. Every Government in the world has examined their Budget and made the necessary changes, and there is no reason that we should not do the same.

We have limited powers as a regional Assembly, but granting a massive cash injection to the social housing programme is undoubtedly one of the best things that we can do to help. By building new houses and carrying out repairs, we can cut waiting lists, help people who are in housing stress and give hope to the homeless.

The SDLP has shown where the money for newbuild and maintenance programmes can be found. We put forward the relevant proposals in 'New Priorities in Difficult Times'. We have put our plans on the table while others have done very little. Other parties in the House must see the merit in those plans. Many academics, such as Mike Smyth from the University of Ulster, support our ideas. However, one does not have to be a professor to know that building houses creates jobs.

If we undertake the programme in the right manner and build on land that the Housing Executive already owns, we will put money straight into the wage packets of construction workers and the accounts of local building firms. Rathenraw in Antrim, for example, is a perfect site for social housing. It has vast amounts of green open space, where many old houses have been demolished. All the land is owned by the Department for Social Development, and it makes sense to build social housing there.

Social housing will quickly deliver the required economic boost. Projects are ready to go at any given time if the money is available. They can be started with little delay because the plans are already in place, and planning permission has already been secured. I urge the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the entire Executive to find the money to start the projects. We must do all that we can to help the economy and the people. Therefore, let us get the social housing programme back on track and give the whole economy a big shot in the arm.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the support from the Ulster Unionist Party, the Alliance Party and Sinn Féin. I am not sure whether the DUP intends to support the motion.

Mr Shannon: Yes, we do.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you. Jim Shannon is always a good supporter of housing.

It is fair to say that the Sinn Féin Members who spoke attacked the SDLP Minister. In fact, political commentators have noted the sustained attacks over many years against the SDLP and its Minister. For example, Newton Emerson said that Sinn Féin's commitment to attacking Ms Ritchie remains beyond question. Perhaps today that party was at it a bit more than in other days because it may be a bit sore about socialist politicians, given that they may not be good for Sinn Féin, as the people of Dublin pointed out over the past few days.

I want to pick up on a number of points. Jonathan Craig and other Members made the point that the debate should not be about newbuild versus maintenance. The issue is crystal clear: there is simply not enough money in the housing budget. The Executive need to revisit the Budget so that more resources can be given to housing. Mr Burns made that plea in his contribution, and he highlighted very eloquently a scheme in Antrim in which work could commence tomorrow if money were available.

Several Members quoted from Michael Smyth and Dr Mark Bailey's recent publication in which they said that a number of successes could be made to address the economic downturn not only in creating construction jobs but in the ancillary services associated with construction. Many jobs depend on the construction industry, such as small plumbing supplies shops, tile and carpet shops, electricians and other tradespeople with whom Members are familiar. The Minister made it clear and Members acknowledged the fact that disabled facilities grants will not be touched in the home improvements.

Some Members talked about home improvements and pointed out that some constituents have very poor kitchens. We can all be sympathetic to that. Mr McNarry pointed out that some people who own two or three homes will not show much empathy with people who do not own any homes. Mr McCann must acknowledge that people should at least have a roof over their heads. That is the priority. It was a difficult decision, but our Minister makes difficult decisions: she does not shy away from them.

Later, we will hear about homelessness in Foyle from some Sinn Féin Members who want to see money being spent on newbuilds. The choice for our Minister was between new homes or new kitchens, and it is a very simple argument. What the motion asks for in the June monitoring round is that the Minister of Finance and Personnel should give whatever money is available

to the Minister for Social Development for housing and allow that money to be ring-fenced. It is regrettable that the Minister of Finance and Personnel is not here this afternoon to respond.

Other Members accused the Minister for Social Development of giving money back in the December monitoring round. That was misleading and was not the case. Margaret Ritchie wanted to reallocate money in her Department, and, as Sinn Féin knows, she must get the Finance Minister's permission to move money around the different elements of her Department's programmes. Sinn Féin wanted that money to go to slurry tanks and slurry housing because of the failure of the Crossnacreevy site in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's budget. Therefore, if the cap fits, some of those Members should start wearing it. Our Minister has tried very hard to meet the needs of people and to put people first.

I agree with Martina Anderson's comment that the shortfall in the Housing Executive's budget particularly hits people who live in some of the most deprived and disadvantaged communities. Other Members also linked poor health outcomes and health inequalities to poor housing.

Members from across the Chamber rightly said that monitoring rounds are not a good way to run a Department. No Minister would seek to run his or her Department on a hand-to-mouth existence. In the short term, however, it is incumbent on the Minister of Finance and Personnel at least to give some hope to those on waiting lists for a new home that the money will be transferred and ring-fenced for DSD housing in the June monitoring rounds.

Next week, the Assembly will have the opportunity to debate some of the Budget allocations. However, some Members, including Mr Roy Beggs, pointed out that the two main parties that revise the Budget — the DUP and Sinn Féin — have an inflexible attitude to doing so. The Budget was set at a time of economic boom, but those parties have not allowed it to be revisited during the current global recession.

Mr Burns commented on the SDLP's paper, 'New Priorities in Difficult Times'. He rightly pointed out that, although the SDLP has tabled its paper, no other party has yet tabled any proposals. I hear only silence from the Sinn Féin Benches on that matter. Perhaps Sinn Féin Members are embarrassed by their Minister's performance on a wide range of issues. They seem to have no retort on that point.

Mr O'Loan highlighted the many benefits that investment in housing would bring. He related how the Programme for Government budget was predicated on land and housing sales, as did several other Members. Mr O'Loan ably and factually — unlike some — and as a matter of public record pointed out where the difficulties arose.

Mr Kennedy: Which cap was that?

Mrs D Kelly: Which cap indeed?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Simpson, agreed with Mr O'Loan that poor housing has a profound impact on people and creates health inequalities. He also talked about the decline in resources for social housing. However, he proceeded to go off-script slightly by talking as a member of the DUP as opposed to the Chairperson of the Committee. Unfortunately, he is not present to respond to me on that point.

Some £110 million of the money allocated to the urban regeneration of the Royal Exchange may not be spent. My colleague Alex Attwood welcomed the support of the DUP and Sinn Féin for its reallocation within DSD for housing projects should that be the case.

Mr Shannon rightly paid tribute to staff in his constituency who work extremely hard in difficult times with people whose need for home improvement grants causes them distress. He acknowledged the impact that home improvements could have on the creation of jobs in the construction industry, as well as on people who have been waiting for such a long time. Indeed, unless the shortfall in money for housing is appropriately addressed, it looks as though they will wait a good deal longer.

I see that my time is running out; Members will be most upset about that. I ask for support from across the House. I request that the Minister of Finance and Personnel take note of the views of all parties present in the Chamber. I ask him to ring-fence any moneys given up in the June monitoring round for allocation to the Minister for Social Development so that they may be spent on housing.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the £100 million shortfall in the housing budget; notes in particular the lack of finance available for planned maintenance and improvement works, including private sector grants; calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give top priority to housing in the forthcoming June monitoring round; calls on the Executive to recognise that investment in social housing can boost the construction sector and the wider economy at this time; and further calls on the Minister for Social Development, the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Executive to put long term measures in place to secure the financial future for housing.

2.45 pm

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As is evident, there was no Minister to reply to the preceding debate. Subject to correction, I understand that the relevant authorities in the House believe that the appropriate Minister to reply was the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Irrespective of whether that is the case — you may be in a position to confirm that — it seems to me that it reflects upon the authority of the House if a Minister declines to respond.

I therefore ask the Speaker to make a ruling, after consideration, on whether it is appropriate for a Minister to decline to attend the House without offering an explanation. Should there be recourse to a remedy if a Minister identified as the appropriate person to attend a debate declines to do so? The situation that has arisen today has occurred previously, and it is not sustainable for an appropriate Minister to refuse to come to the House to respond to a debate.

Mr Speaker: I gave the Member some time on what is not a point of order but a matter for the Executive. The decision on whether to send any Minister to the House for a debate rests with the Executive and the Executive alone.

Mr Attwood: Further to my point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand that rule —

Mr Speaker: Order. It is not a point of order. I have already given the Member some time in which to explain himself, but it is certainly not a point of order. I have made it absolutely clear that the Executive alone decide which Ministers, if any, are sent to the House, particularly to respond to private Members' motions.

Mr Attwood: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. I acknowledge your ruling, and I am not in any way querying it. I ask that you revisit the matter of whether the non-attendance of a Minister reflects badly on the authority of the House in the context of no explanation being offered by the Minister who declines to attend. I believe that the fundamental principles of the integrity and the competence of the House are put at stake if a pattern develops of Ministers declining to attend, even when they know that they are the right person to do so. I ask you to reflect upon that at another time. I think that that is a reasonable approach to take.

Mr Speaker: I further say to the Member and I assure him and the House that I certainly give every encouragement that I can to Ministers to attend the House. At the end of the day, no matter how much encouragement Ministers are given, the decision on

whether they attend the House comes down to the individual Minister and to the Executive.

As Question Time for the Social Development Minister starts at 3.00 pm, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until then.

Sitting suspended at 2.48 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

3.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Cavity Wall Insulation

1. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the costs of cavity wall insulation. (AQO 2931/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I think that the Member is inviting me to comment not just on the costs, but on the benefits of cavity wall insulation. Cavity wall insulation is an effective way to save energy and money at home. A well-insulated house keeps warmth indoors, exactly where it should be. The Energy Saving Trust advises that one third of all heat lost in an uninsulated home is lost through the walls. Insulating cavity walls reduces heat loss, and the Energy Saving Trust also advises that yearly savings of approximately £220 can be made on fuel bills in a three-bedroom semi-detached house.

That is why my Department's warm homes scheme offers cavity wall insulation as one of the measures to improve the energy efficiency of privately-owned and privately-rented homes. Since 2001, the warm homes scheme has delivered cavity wall insulation to almost 25,000 homes. The cost of installing cavity wall insulation has risen from an average of £300 per house in 2001 to £440 in 2009. A house that received cavity wall insulation in 2001 will have made energy savings of approximately £1,450. I believe that that represents good value for money. In social housing, nearly all Housing Executive properties built with traditional cavity walls have now been insulated.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her response. She is quite right that I did want to elicit from her the benefits of the warm homes scheme, which, as she said, has been running since 2001 and has benefited many people. However, I am concerned that there may be a waiting list —

Mr Speaker: The Member should ask his question.

Mr McCarthy: Is there a waiting list for cavity wall insulation and for other forms of energy saving in homes in Northern Ireland?

The Minister for Social Development: As Members are only too well aware, the warm homes scheme has been extremely successful — a victim of

its own success — over the past years. It clearly protects the vulnerable. Taking that central viewpoint, I protected the budgetary position of the warm homes scheme in the recent Budget announcement. In fact, the scheme received an increase in budget. In our pursuit of targeting the most vulnerable in society, we changed the warm homes scheme to ensure that it was better focused on those who need help. The new contractors will be in place in the coming days, and they will work their way through all current applications and will communicate the outcome to applicants. I hope that under the new scheme, we will insulate even more houses for those who need it most.

Further to the question that the Member asked me, I hope that we will be able to deal with the particular issues of the waiting list. If the Member has any specific constituency issues that he feels have not been addressed properly, he can bring those to the Housing Executive or, failing that, to me.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I hope that the Minister's colleagues do not construe the following to be part of a sustained attack on her; it is simply a question. Will the Minister give us some indication of when the warm homes scheme will be operational again?

The Minister for Social Development: Contrary to what Mr Brady said, I hope that the new contractors will be in place in the coming days, and that they will then work through the backlog of applications to ensure that every application is dealt with as quickly as possible.

It is important to emphasise that the warm homes scheme protects the vulnerable. During the Budget debate and despite the budgetary problems, I was anxious to protect the vulnerable, those who are in housing need and the homeless. I did that by protecting the newbuild programme and those who are in fuel poverty by increasing the budgetary allocation to the warm homes scheme. I was also anxious to protect those who require supported housing, as it is better to provide them with supported housing than to have them suffer the indignity of institutionalisation.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her response; it contains plenty of detail, as do all her responses. Nonetheless, I am sure that the Minister is aware of verbal and written commitments that people have been given on the installation of insulation and heating to their homes. I have some concerns, as have other Members, about when those commitments will be honoured. When will those who have been on the Eaga scheme be in the new scheme? I have received many letters on that issue.

The Minister for Social Development: I know that Members are interested in that issue, notwithstanding the good weather. Applicants for the warm homes scheme contract have been interviewed by the Housing

Executive, and notification letters to successful and unsuccessful installers who applied were issued on Thursday 28 May. The unsuccessful applicants have 15 days in which to appeal the decision. However, subject to no judicial interruption, I intend to make a public announcement in the next few days. It is critical that we ensure that help is focused on where it is most required and that the new contractors can deal with the outstanding applications as quickly as possible.

As I said to Mr McCarthy, Mr Shannon should, in the first instance, refer issues concerning his constituents to the Housing Executive. Subsequently, he can pass on to me for immediate investigation any issues that he feels have not been properly addressed.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her detailed responses. What plans are there to convert the heating systems of more Housing Executive homes to natural gas?

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive's programme for the financial year 2008-09 makes provision for heating upgrades to 1,200 dwellings to the preferred heating system of gas. Full details will be published in the Housing Executive's district housing plans, which will be brought to local councils this summer. Those plans depend on the availability of funding, and, by now, Members are aware that the housing budget is under significant pressure. As a result, difficult decisions that will directly affect what can be delivered have had to be made on the allocation of limited resources. However, it makes little sense to have the new gas service extended to towns in Northern Ireland and not to connect it to houses.

Let me be clear: there is not enough money in the housing budget. I refer Members to the motion that was debated in the House earlier today. All of us must win the argument to have it increased and placed on a more sustained annual level. I want to put housing on a long-term and secure financial footing. Living hand to mouth in hopeful anticipation of being granted extra money from quarterly rounds is not acceptable; it is no way to run a multi-million pound programme. Be assured that I will continue to lobby my Executive colleagues for their support for increases in funding for social housing, including the conversion of the heating systems in more Housing Executive dwellings to natural gas over the next year.

Therefore, I welcome the motion from my party colleagues that was debated earlier, and I welcome Members' support for the general content of that motion, notwithstanding some of the barbed comments that were made.

Nevertheless, the point is crystal clear: we need to put housing on a sound financial footing, once and for all. That is why I commissioned Mr Mike Smyth from the University of Ulster to undertake significant

research. That was published yesterday, and a copy of it has been placed in Members' pigeonholes.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn. Mr P J Bradley is not in his place to ask question 3.

Social Housing

4. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister for Social Development what opportunities exist to build a greater proportion of social housing in land already in public ownership. (AQO 2934/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mr Gallagher for his question; he is quite right to identify the opportunity that exists to develop social housing on land that is already in public ownership. That way, we get more houses for our money, and, during the last two years, I have sought to increase the number of homes built on land owned by the Housing Executive. During that time, we built 670 such homes, but, even at that, I thought that we could do better. That is why, in the current year, we plan to deliver 573 new homes on what we call transfer schemes. Those are schemes that are built on Housing Executive land and then transferred to a housing association.

I have also circulated details of the Housing Executive's surplus land schedule to all housing associations to ascertain what potential they can see in developing that land. That is particularly important if they can identify an emerging housing need that may not previously have existed. At a time when resources are so scarce, it makes sense to make best use of the assets that we have.

That point was made in a report that I commissioned during my first few months in office, and I am happy to assure Members that I will continue to explore each and every opportunity that exists to help me to increase the supply of housing here, despite the very real difficulties that I face due to the shortfall of some £100 million this year and £100 million next year that my budget will suffer. With a budgetary shortfall of that magnitude, we have to stretch every pound as far as possible until we put housing on a firm financial footing.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Minister for that answer. What is her view on the overall state of our public housing stock in relation to unfitness and maintenance, and what does she feel can be done in that regard, bearing in mind the need for best value for money?

The Minister for Social Development: Members may not be aware that the bulk of our public housing stock is in very good condition. Levels of unfitness have fallen steadily year on year, and I give credit to the Housing Executive and our housing associations, which have invested heavily to make that happen. However, we are now in more difficult and challenging

economic times. The money to maintain and modernise our stock is not available right now, and who knows what lies ahead for us in the next spending review?

That is why I commissioned a major piece of work to look into the condition of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive housing stock. That will give us a powerful insight into the appropriateness of our current maintenance policies. I recently received that report from the international surveying firm Savills, and I am currently considering its findings. I expect that work to provide a fully costed maintenance strategy that will help us to identify exactly what resources we will need in the coming years to maintain our stock.

Mr G Robinson: Has the Minister identified any potential sites on publicly owned land in areas of housing stress?

The Minister for Social Development: Naturally, in my answer to Mr Gallagher's initial question, I emphasised the need to use transfer schemes. In fact, when the original social housing development programme came to me, about 17% of the sites included in it were in transfer schemes.

I sent the programme back to the Housing Executive because I was not satisfied that we were getting best value for money or stretching every pound in this difficult budgetary situation. I was therefore pleased that it came back to me with a significant number of transfer schemes. I believe that that is the direction in which we must go. As regards the issue that Mr Robinson raised, I hope to publish the programme for this year shortly. That will show clearly that we are using a significant number of transfer schemes throughout Northern Ireland.

3.15 pm

Mr McNarry: The Minister's answer to a previous question was very interesting. Can she tell us what current and potential access she has to land that is owned by the Executive, but not necessarily by her own Department, for the development of social and mixed-use housing? What discussions has she had with the Minister of Finance and Personnel about getting access to that land?

The Minister for Social Development: Mr McNarry's point is very pertinent, and I presume that he is referring to the capital assets realisation team (CART). I have raised those particular issues directly with the Minister of Finance and Personnel as recently as our last meeting on budgetary issues in January. In fact, I raised the issue of land and property owned by the Housing Executive, including the sale and leaseback of the headquarters of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Be assured that I am raising those issues; I want to secure the best value for the money that we have so that we can address the very acute housing

need that all Members have identified throughout Northern Ireland.

Ms Lo: Will the land transfers be at market value, or would it be better to hold on to the land for a little longer? I know the importance of making use of the land, but can the Minister consider that point?

The Minister for Social Development: The pertinent issue is to ensure that we get the best value for every pound that we have and to ensure that we have a greater ability and capacity to address housing need. Over the past two years, I have sought to increase the number of homes that are built on land that the Housing Executive owns. There are significant parcels of land throughout Northern Ireland, and, given that, I circulated details of the Housing Executive's surplus land schedule to all housing associations. I informed them of that last November at the annual general meeting in Enniskillen of the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations.

Benefit Fraud

5. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister for Social Development what assessment she has made of the impact of the recession on levels of benefit fraud.
(AQO 2935/09)

The Minister for Social Development: It is still too early to determine the impact that the recession is having on increased benefit demand, but it is clear that a risk of an increase in fraud remains. The latest figures for 2008 show no noticeable impact on fraud levels to date. The current downturn has an impact primarily on jobseeker's allowance, and although the number of claimants has increased significantly, expenditure on jobseeker's allowance in 2008 was still relatively low, at just over 2% of total benefit expenditure. That means that increases in jobseeker's allowance are unlikely to have a noticeable impact on the overall levels of fraud.

The Social Security Agency has a robust security strategy to drive down levels of fraud. In 2001-02, 1.9% of expenditure was lost through fraud. However, the latest figures, which are still subject to Audit Office scrutiny, indicate that the estimated level of fraud in 2008 was down to 0.3% of annual benefit expenditure. Despite the success, I am not complacent, and I can assure Members that tackling fraud remains one of the agency's top priorities. I will continue to monitor the situation closely to ensure that only those properly entitled to benefit receive the help that they need.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister clarify whether she is saying that the figure for fraud was previously 1.9% and that it is now down to 0.3%? I might not have picked her up correctly.

On a general point, does the Minister agree that benefit fraud is a blight on our society? We must do everything to ensure that those who legitimately need benefits receive them, while those who steal from other people are — I was going to use bad language, but I will refrain. It is not the appropriate way to go forward. Perhaps the Minister will tell us how strongly she feels about the issue.

The Minister for Social Development: I will repeat what I said. We have a very robust strategy to drive down levels of fraud. In 2001-02, 1.9% of expenditure was lost through fraud. However, the latest figures, which are still subject to scrutiny by the Audit Office, indicate that the estimated level of fraud in 2008 was down to 0.3% of annual benefit expenditure. I see that as a good news story.

With regard to the second part of Mr McCrea's question, I am not happy that people are involved in benefit fraud. I want those people who are entitled to benefit to be able to have access to all the benefit systems to ensure that they receive the benefit to which they are entitled. I will be announcing my benefit uptake campaign for this financial year shortly, and I want to encourage everybody in the House, MLAs who have constituents — *[Interruption.]*

Less of the frivolity. I am sure that you agree, Mr Speaker.

It is important for MLAs to encourage those constituents who are entitled to claim benefits, and who might be slightly dilatory in doing so, to apply for them. If they are entitled to benefits, they will get them, and it will make a substantial improvement to their lives, their health and their well-being.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle agus a Aire. Will the Minister give some indication of how her Department is dealing with clerical error in the Social Security Agency, and how much it has cost the Department? The cost of clerical error is probably equivalent to that of wrongdoing, which is what benefit fraud is.

The Minister for Social Development: As with the figure for fraud, the figure for error has also come down dramatically. There is no doubt that that is due to the sheer hard work of officials in the Social Security Agency, which often goes unnoticed. The percentage of expenditure overpaid due to official error is 0.5%, and the figure for customer error is 0.4%. Any banker, banking institution, insurance company or financial institution would be deeply envious of those figures, which I am sure cannot be matched.

Mrs Hanna: Will the Minister outline the general trend of the level of benefit fraud here?

The Minister for Social Development: Mrs Hanna has raised a pertinent issue. The estimated levels of

benefit fraud have fallen steadily from almost 2% of expenditure to 0.3% of expenditure in 2008. Members will agree that that is a tremendous achievement by the management and staff of the Social Security Agency, and I pay tribute to the staff. Due to their efforts, the level of fraud has been reduced year on year and compares favourably with what is achieved in similar, larger organisations dispensing billions of pounds.

DSD Budget

6. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an overview of her Department's current budgetary position. (AQO 2936/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department's expenditure limit for 2009-2010 is £754.4 million, which is divided among the three broad spending areas of social security, housing and urban regeneration. Although my Department faces many funding pressures, the main one relates to the housing budget. That has arisen as a result of the shortfall in capital house and land sales receipts due to the economic downturn. The budget settlement had anticipated several hundred million pounds in house and land sales receipts in the comprehensive spending review, but, unfortunately, they will not be realised. That is no one's fault; rather, it simply points to the need, once and for all, to put housing on a proper and sound financial footing.

I have, therefore, tabled bids for more than £100 million in the June monitoring round, and I am relying on being afforded a degree of flexibility to redirect and re-prioritise resources across all business areas, as was the case in 2008-09. I have consistently impressed on my Executive colleagues the indisputable benefits of injecting funding into housing. The Members who were present in the Chamber during the debate that took place before Question Time are aware of the recent work that academics at the University of Ulster carried out that supports the case. Funding will provide much-needed social housing for the homeless and prevent further job losses in the construction industry, thereby protecting some of the most vulnerable people in society.

Other pressures also exist in my Department; however, as the year progresses, my officials will carefully monitor and manage the budgetary position.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive response. However, she did not deal with the issue of replacement and renovation grants for houses in rural areas. Given that money is still being injected into social housing in urban areas, people in rural areas are concerned that they are being discriminated against. A recent house condition survey indicates that, of the 19,800 unfit dwellings, 53% are in rural communities.

What is the Minister doing to bring forward funding for replacement and renovation grants for houses in rural areas?

The Minister for Social Development: I fully sympathise with the Member and with all the people in rural communities who have had difficulties with their applications for all types of improvement grants.

First, the central issue is funding. Once and for all, housing must be placed on a sound financial footing. I think that I now have the support of all Members in ensuring that housing is put on a sound financial footing, because it must no longer be subject to the crumbs from quarterly monitoring rounds.

Secondly, I have ensured that, where formal approval has been issued, grant applications will continue to be funded and that the disabled facilities grant scheme and the mandatory repair grants will also continue to operate normally. I have great sympathy for many of my constituents who are waiting for a grant. As recently as yesterday, I asked the Housing Executive to keep all valid applications live, even though money is not currently available. I understand the position in which the Housing Executive finds itself.

I hope that, in the June monitoring round, the Minister of Finance and Personnel will see fit to honour the commitments that he gave in a letter dated 9 January 2009 and in a statement that he issued after he met the Northern Ireland Housing Council. He said:

"Social housing continues to be a priority for the Executive and for me personally."

I hope that that statement will be honoured through a significant allocation to DSD, ensuring that I will be able to give the Housing Executive the funds it needs to deal with all the outstanding applications for grant aid. I would love to be able to do all the work that is required, but I need the money. That is why — here I return to the central core of the argument and the debate — housing needs to be put on a sound financial footing. I believe that I have the support of the entire House in that respect.

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That brings to an end questions to the Minister for Social Development.

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

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — *[Mr Deputy Speaker.]*

ADJOURNMENT

Social Housing in Foyle

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 10 minutes.

Mr Durkan: It is timely that we have this Adjournment debate on the back of the debate that took place earlier today on financing the housing programme. However, this debate relates specifically to the situation in Foyle and the acute need for social housing there.

Derry has a very high social housing demand and very real social need. The figures for the end of 2008 show that there was a waiting list of 2,400 people across the city: of those, 1,400 were deemed to be in housing stress. Therefore, the problem is very real there. Indeed, when Members in the previous debate and the Minister during Question Time spoke of the problems and pressures in the housing budget, it is people in housing need in places such as Derry who worry and wonder whether the Executive's priorities will deliver for them.

The Minister for Social Development reflected very strong commitment to deliver the Programme for Government targets for newbuild houses. Therefore, faced with a £100 million shortfall in her budget this year and next, she has kept a firm focus on delivering those newbuilds, which is the correct approach. However, I know that all Members also support the Minister in her attempt to receive as much topping-up from the various monitoring rounds as possible. Those funds will ensure that commitments can also be met in the areas of replacement grants and housing maintenance and repair, areas that are not just an issue in the Foyle constituency but in many others.

Several issues and concerns have arisen in Derry regarding the delivery of new social housing, and the questions arising from the Budget have already been well aired in the previous debate and during today's Question Time. However, additional complications arose as a result of the interpretation of EU public procurement law, which fundamentally affected the planned approach to design and build between developers and housing associations. In particular, a significant site at Skeoge in Derry, which was ripe for 280 new homes to be built, was stymied because of the impact of EU public procurement law. The housing

association was committed and the developer was ready, and the houses would be in good demand and would be produced to a very high specification to meet all the modern environmental standards. People who were involved with the project were at a loss to understand where the difficulties had arisen. There seemed to be some sense that the rules were not causing the same problems with design and build in other jurisdictions.

I have made verbal and written representations to the Minister, and she has been kind enough to reply to set out the nature of the problem. However, I am concerned about the impact that that will have not only on the site in Derry but on other projects that housing associations and developers were planning in other parts of the North through the design-and-build approach, which the Department and the Housing Executive have built up and encouraged in the past number of years.

The developer was, obviously, notified that the legal issues meant that the project could not proceed on the terms that were originally envisaged. That created some uncertainty about the terms on which such a project could proceed. In Derry, the Housing Executive, councillors and other public representatives relied on the houses being built. There has been some concern about the delay with the project and the uncertainty that that has created.

The project would not only have delivered much-needed houses but much-needed jobs. I have received representations from many firms, not only from the primary developer but from all the other subcontractors and downstream suppliers, who, clearly, are affected by the situation. They retained people on their payroll in anticipation of the work that would have come from the contract, but the uncertainty has created difficulties.

I would be grateful if the Minister could tell us where the scheme stands and where we stand on the overall issue of design and build. An urgent review is needed to ensure that problems are not created all over the place because of the interpretations. The Minister said in her letters to me that other procurement routes are being explored and identified. Can she clarify how well they are being identified, and, in the case of Derry, are a number of sites being considered? Over how many years is that being done? We do not want the problem to be solved for one possible project only to have to go through it again for other projects. Can clarification be provided to give confidence that a clear pathway is in place for the way forward with a coherent procurement framework that will be workable for housing associations in the private sector and for the Housing Executive?

I mentioned the Skeoge site, and I also ask for the Minister's assistance with the Old School Lane site. At

that site, a housing association has identified lands that were held by different interests and Departments. DSD's local development office, the North West Development Office, was very helpful in assembling that site. One outstanding impediment is awaiting approval by Roads Service, which has a slice of land at the site. I ask the Minister to do anything that she can to expedite the conclusion of that long-awaited scheme on Old School Lane on the Racecourse Road in the Shantallow area. It is not affected by the design-and-build issue; it has been about land assembly and transition and getting agreements signed off.

The Minister also visited another prospective site for social housing on the Springtown Road on a field above Hawthorn Grove. The field is directly attached to the new, positive and attractive housing development by Habinteg Housing Association. According to the area plan, the site is above the building altitude line, yet the natural reference point for a cut-off for the building altitude line should have been the next road, which is the road on the other side of that field. That is a site for which developer, landowner and housing association are ready. All that is needed is an adjustment. Will the Minister make representations to the Minister of the Environment so that there can be a sensible relaxation of the rules at that location, on account of the pressing need for housing? It will not interfere with anything else.

We are told that the location is above the building altitude line. However, if one stands in that field and looks across the Springtown Road, one can see other houses built well above that line. Building there will not breach any rules; it is simply where the line was drawn. It should have been drawn at the road, rather than at a hedge that divides two fields. It would help if the Minister could assist in that regard.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about the other procurement sites that have been identified. I understand that, this year, upwards of 100 houses are to be delivered in Derry. I ask the Minister whether they will be completed on target and how that fits in with the supply to come through the new procurement routes that we discussed for the other sites. Can she give us any assurance that the volume of houses that we looked forward to in the Skeoge proposals will be delivered, whatever rejigging of the procurement routes is involved? If so, it will give a great deal of comfort not only to those awaiting houses but to those depending on the work that can come from those opportunities.

We could discuss the turnover that could come through re-lets and so on. However, other issues that I was going to raise have been well rehearsed and well aired in the earlier debate by other Members, including other Members who represent Foyle, so I will not

touch on those now. I leave the opportunity to raise them to other Members.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. Social housing is an extremely pressing issue in Derry. I thank Mark Durkan for tabling the Adjournment topic. My colleague in Foyle, Raymond McCartney, would also like to have spoken, but he is away on Committee business. He sends his apologies.

Some 2,700 people are now on the housing waiting list in the Derry City Council area, and 1,350 of them are deemed to be homeless. More than 100 people are in temporary accommodation in the city and do not know when they will be housed. Those figures are shocking, and, unfortunately, the plans to tackle them are equally disturbing.

Perhaps the Minister will correct me if I am wrong — it will be good news if she can — but planned social housing development in Derry over the next 12 months is as follows: some 72 homes are to be built by North and West Housing Ltd, of which 63 are to be at Dove Gardens and nine in Steelstown. Those nine homes in Steelstown will be the only new social housing to be built in the past two years in greater Shantallow, which has a population of more than 35,000. Habinteg Housing Association Ltd plans to build 13 homes at Lourdes Hall. Oaklee Housing Association has no plans whatsoever to build, nor does the Fold Housing Association, after plans for 280 homes at Skeoge were put on hold, as Mark Durkan said. That makes a total of 85 homes, to address a waiting list that is rapidly approaching 3,000 people.

I fully understand that some newbuilds, including the Skeoge development, have been delayed by the recent European directive on design-and-build schemes. In the past, the majority of social housing was built through design-and-build schemes, which is a kind of all-in-one arrangement in which the landholder was also the developer. However, the EU now rules that a landowner cannot be given the contract for development without there first being a competitive procurement process. All of us recognise the need to get the best possible value for public money. We are told that the European Union's ruling is designed to do that, and we hope that it will.

What must happen now is that the Department must manage the issue, work with the developers, identify alternative arrangements where necessary, and, ultimately, ensure that social housing schemes go ahead as planned and on schedule.

3.45 pm

Last month, DSD stated categorically that a series of other potential projects had been earmarked to ensure that its target of 1,750 new homes in 2009 would be met. A DSD spokesperson said that the

ruling on design and build does not threaten that target. Those words are welcome. However, I want to hear the details behind the statement, particularly with regard to the Foyle constituency. What potential projects have been identified in Derry? How many of those 1,750 homes will be built in Derry? When will they be completed? Has funding been ring-fenced? How many schemes in Derry have been affected or delayed by the ruling? Is the Department working with developers to ensure that schemes go ahead on time?

Mr McCartney and I are also being asked whether social requirements will be built into EU procurement contracts, so that public money is used to achieve a number of objectives. As well as building social houses, we can take people out of long-term unemployment, and much-needed apprenticeships can be provided in Derry. We want information on that.

Furthermore, there is a view that the Minister has abandoned all improvement and maintenance schemes for social housing because she is concentrating all of her resources on newbuilds, which, in Derry, amounts to only 85 new homes. There is grave concern. That means that people must go without necessary repairs and improvements to their homes because the Minister is unable to balance her budget. Robbing Peter to pay Paul is not what anyone expects from an Executive Minister. I could almost accept it if plenty of social houses were being built. Given that only 85 to 100 homes are being built and in view of waiting lists of nearly 3,000 people, that is unacceptable.

As I have explained, as far as Derry is concerned, the Housing Minister neither builds houses nor repairs those that already exist. What exactly is being done with the housing budget? More specifically, what is being done with the budget to target clear objective need in Derry, the area that we hail from and about which we all have grave concerns?

As I have said, I fully endorse the Minister's stated commitment to build new social houses. However, the people of Derry need more than words. They need delivery, and they need it now.

Mrs M Bradley: Mark Durkan has covered much of what I intended to say. Therefore, I will focus my comments on the area about which I know most: Shantallow. The problem in that area is that, at present, there are more than 700 families on the housing waiting list. Every week, four or five families present themselves as homeless at the local Housing Executive office. Those families are then placed in private housing. That is problematic because they find that they cannot sustain living in those houses because of the higher rents that need to be paid to private landlords, sometimes as much as £30 or £40 more. They go back to the Housing Executive to say that they cannot stay

in those houses and that they need homes that cost less rent.

The only way to deal with that is for the Finance Minister to give the Minister for Social Development the money that she requires to build houses. There is no other answer. The Minister does not waste money. She has made good use of all of the money that she has received.

I thought that the election was over and that, therefore, point scoring would have finished. I am sick listening to point-scoring between local politicians in Derry, which includes those from Sinn Féin. It goes on constantly. One would think that there were only one Minister to attack. I am disappointed that Mr Dodds is not present. The Finance Minister should have been in the Chamber to hear exactly what is going on in Derry and what people there need. Surely, he should have paid Members the courtesy of listening to those problems.

If you talk to people and families in Derry about housing, they tell you that the current situation is just as their mothers described the 1950s and 1960s, when houses were occupied by 10 or 12 people or, possibly, by two families. We are returning to that situation. It is obvious therefore that responsibility lies with the Finance Minister. He must give the Social Development Minister the money that she needs to build houses. Margaret Ritchie has said, over and over again, "Give me money, and I will build houses". She is not getting money; she is getting blame.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

After that lively contribution, I thank my colleague Mark Durkan MLA for Foyle for securing the topic for debate. It is a timely debate, particularly as it follows the earlier motion on the housing budget and the questions for oral answer, which, by and large, concentrated on housing.

The increased supply of social and affordable housing is my first priority. We have had two debates on the issue today, and I am glad that Members share my objectives. I thank Mark for his supportive and well-informed opening remarks, which have facilitated a better debate than might otherwise have been the case. I will try to address all Members' questions and will, naturally, study the Hansard report and write directly to Members whose questions are not covered by my response.

At the end of 2008, almost 2,400 applicants were on the waiting list for housing in the West Bank and Waterside areas of Derry, and 1,400 experienced housing stress. We can tackle that structural challenge only by increasing newbuilds and by ensuring a steady flow of re-lets. Although waiting lists have increased steadily for several years, in 2008 we managed to restrict the growth and secure more allocations to social housing than in previous years. During 2008, we

allocated 618 homes to those in greatest housing need in Derry. However, as I said, that measure did not reduce waiting lists overall; it merely restricted their growth. When the private housing market is in the doldrums, as it is now, people remain in social housing and re-lets are relatively low.

I have made social housing newbuild my priority because that is where the structural problem lies. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive estimates that, in order to make inroads into waiting lists, 3,000 new homes are required across the North every year. Although I have increased social newbuilds significantly from direct rule levels, the 1,750 that are planned for 2009 and the 2,000 that are planned for 2010 are not enough. Derry will, of course, receive its fair share of the social newbuild programme. However, we need increased resources to do more to help people in housing need, not only in Foyle but across the North.

As we heard during the previous debate, the budget available to me this year is likely to be £100 million less than was previously anticipated, and a similar position is expected next year. For a long time, I have argued that the housing budget must be placed on a firm financial footing. The hand-to-mouth existence and reliance on in-year monitoring does not work if one is tasked with delivering housing programmes that require a long lead-in period of planning and advance approvals.

In arguing for more resources, I assure Members that I will not simply transfer responsibility for housing delivery to the Executive. I am conscious that I must make the scarce resources at my disposal stretch further, and I have introduced initiatives to do so. So far, I have introduced a new procurement strategy that will ensure that the newbuild programme is delivered more efficiently than before, and savings will be reinvested to deliver more houses. Since autumn 2007, I have increased private investment in new social housing and reduced public subsidy per unit from 77% to 63%, which, in real terms, equates to a saving of £33,000 a house that can be spent on more houses. I have also increased the number of houses that we plan to build on land that we already own. In the last two years, we have built, on average, 300 homes on land that is already in departmental or Housing Executive ownership. This year, we plan to build up to 573 new homes on our own land. By building on land that we already own, we can reduce our grant rates by up to 30%, in effect getting us more bang for our buck. When I ask my Executive colleagues to deliver a more sustainable budget for housing, they can do so safe in the knowledge that every penny will be wisely and soundly invested.

I will return to the specifics of social housing in Foyle. In this year alone, we will deliver a minimum of 116 new homes across three sites in the city. Sometimes we hear complaints that Derry is not getting its fair

share of social housing — nothing could be further from the truth.

Mark Durkan mentioned Skeoge specifically, and, at his request, I met the developers of that site several months ago. Members will be aware by now that that scheme, like so many others, unfortunately had to be withdrawn from our programme because legal advice clearly indicated that the plans for that scheme were no longer compliant with EU public procurement law. As Mr Durkan rightly said, he raised the issue of legal advice in other jurisdictions with me. I had the matter fully investigated, and the legal advice that the Housing Executive, the housing associations and I received concurred with that which was given in England, Scotland and Wales. I assure Members of that.

That is not to say, however, that we cannot explore other options for development in Derry and elsewhere if such alternatives can comply with current procurement law. Indeed, those discussions have already started, and I can give Members some detail about that. On my instruction, the Housing Executive replaced negotiated design-and-build packages with alternative newbuild schemes using traditional competitive procurement arrangements. That immediate action should ensure that the target to provide 1,750 new social housing homes this year will be achieved.

As a result of the public notice that appeared in national newspapers two or three weeks ago, former design-and-build contractors are free to compete for construction work that is commissioned under the social housing development plan. I was fully aware of the concerns that Mark Durkan in particular raised about that issue. Those contractors can also opt to sell their development land to housing associations at any time. I want everyone to be assured about that.

I guarantee Members that Derry will continue to get its fair share of the cake. However, the real challenge is to make the cake bigger.

I will now address the issues that were raised by Mark Durkan and other Members. Mr Durkan mentioned Springtown Road, Hawthorn Grove and Habinteg Housing Association. In late August or September 2008, on the day that I held a housing conference and seminar, I visited that site. I am fully aware of the planning issues surrounding the site and the need for an adjustment to the building altitude line. I will make renewed representations to the Minister of the Environment to ensure that we can achieve a sensible relaxation.

Mr Durkan mentioned other sites. In that regard, I hope that he will be pleased with the contents of this year's social housing development programme, which I will publish soon. I am not yet entirely satisfied with the programme, which is why I am a little hesitant, but I want to assure Members that it is my wish to get as much as I can for Derry while realising the housing need.

Martina Anderson left me in some doubt, given her confused contribution to the debate. I suppose that she indicated the need for housing to be put on a sound financial footing, but she then queried the issue of ring-fencing. Naturally, because I wanted to protect the vulnerable throughout Northern Ireland, I ring-fenced the budget for the social housing development programme in order to ensure the delivery of 1,750 houses.

4.00 pm

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

The Minister for Social Development: I am fully conscious that I have not explored all the issues that Members raised. I will review the Hansard report and come back to Members with more detailed answers. I thank Members for their contributions, and I assure them that I will look after Derry to ensure that the situation reflects housing need.

Adjourned at 4.00 pm.

Written Ministerial Statements

The content of these written ministerial statements is as received at the time from the Ministers. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

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.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Department for Regional Development: Corporate Plan 2009-11 and Business Plan 2009-10

Published at 1pm on 18 May 2009

Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I am pleased to inform Assembly Members of the publication of the Department for Regional Development's (DRD) Corporate Plan 2009-11 and Business Plan 2009-10.

The Corporate Plan recognises that times have changed and that we are facing very significant economic pressures. It outlines how we will face the challenges this presents and continue to improve the quality of life for all by investing in Roads, Public Transport and Water and Sewerage services.

The Business Plan details our targets for 2009-10 as we work towards delivering our longer-term Public Service Agreement targets and other commitments set out in the Programme for Government 2008-11.

The plans are available for viewing on the DRD internet site at www.drdni.gov.uk. Hard copies of the plan are available from the Library. Additional copies can be obtained by contacting the Department's Strategic Planning Branch on (028) 9054 0930.

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.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Appointment of the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland

Published at 10.30am on Monday 1 June 2009

Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I am pleased to inform Assembly Members of the appointment of members to the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland (“the Commission”).

The Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 which was granted Royal Assent in September 2008 provides for a new regulatory framework for all charities operating in Northern Ireland. The Commission, a non-departmental public body, will be Northern Ireland’s first regulator and registrar of charities.

The first of a series of Commencement Orders which will bring the new legislation into operation was made on 26 March 2009. The Order commenced those provisions relating to the establishment of the Commission, thus paving the way for the appointment of members.

Competitions to recruit members of the Commission were carried out under the public appointments process which is regulated by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. Today, I will announce the names of those candidates whom I have appointed, as follows:

| | |
|----------------------------|--------------------|
| Chief Commissioner: | Mr Tom McGrath |
| Deputy Chief Commissioner: | Ms Patricia Sloan |
| Charity Commissioners: | Ms Angela Chada |
| | Mr Paul Cavanagh |
| | Mr Philip McDonagh |
| | Mr Walter Rader |

The Commission will be tasked with a major programme of charity law reform which will promote good governance of, and increase public confidence in, the charitable sector. In addition to its significant powers to regulate, monitor and investigate, the Commission will achieve this through close liaison with the PSNI, Revenue & Customs and other charity regulators in the UK and Ireland.

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.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Rathlin Island Policy

Published at 1.00pm on Monday 8 June 2009

Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy):

I am pleased to inform Assembly members that the Executive on 7 May 2009 endorsed a draft Executive policy for Rathlin Island. My department has taken the lead in this matter with the assistance of other departments, local bodies but also incorporating the views of the islanders. The policy is designed to develop a vibrant, healthy Rathlin community on our only off shore inhabited island and improve the conditions of all the people of the island while also protecting its natural and cultural heritage.

It is my intention to launch the public consultation on the draft policy at an event on the island on 10 June and I will make copies available to Members. I will also provide members with more information on the draft policy through an oral statement to the Assembly in the near future.

Committee Stages

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

20 May 2009

EDUCATION BILL (NIA 3/08)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Mary Bradley
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Nelson McCausland
Mr Basil McCrea
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr John O'Dowd
Mr Tom Elliot

Witnesses:

Mr Chris Stewart }
Ms Eve Stewart } Department of Education

The Chairperson (Mr Storey): The Committee has heard evidence on the Education Bill from 13 key education stakeholders, and has received submissions from all the major educational stakeholders. The Committee has noted the many issues and concerns that stakeholders have raised about the changes that the Bill will introduce.

After each stakeholder evidence session, and in previous policy sessions, the Committee has had the benefit of briefings and question-and-answer sessions with senior departmental officials. We should place on record our appreciation to those officials, particularly Chris Stewart and John McGrath, for all their efforts to date, along with the staff that they have brought with them on various occasions. I thank them in advance for their assistance in the weeks to come as the Committee's work on the Bill intensifies.

Having completed the evidence-gathering period of the Committee Stage and its scrutiny of the Bill at last week's meeting, the Committee agreed that it was an appropriate point for it to take stock of some of the key issues and concerns raised about aspects of the Bill and the Department's responses to date, notably the mop-up response from the Department on 5 May 2009, and

the extent to which the Committee is satisfied with that response.

The Committee has kept the Department fully informed of its concerns and those of stakeholders, and we have followed up our weekly meetings with letters confirming requests for additional information that the Committee considered necessary to enable it to determine the merits or otherwise of those issues and concerns. The Committee shares some of the stakeholders' concerns. Members will by now have had an opportunity to consider the Department's response of 5 May to the Committee's requests for information over the past four months. Although some of those requests have been answered in whole or in part, several of the Committee's key requests remain to be dealt with. I trust that those issues will be addressed soon.

That begs the question of how, given the incomplete information, the Committee can move forward in its consideration of the Bill. For example, one of the issues that has most exercised some major stakeholders and members is the creation of a single employing authority and the schemes of employment that are supposed to maximise the autonomy of boards of governors. The model schemes and guidance will not be available for several months. However, over the next few weeks, the Committee must decide whether it is prepared to approve the general concept of a single employing authority and leave it to the Department and the Minister to produce guidance and model schemes that will allow for the maximum autonomy of boards of governors.

The Committee finds it difficult to see how some of the arrangements in the Bill will work in conjunction with the second Education Bill: for example, a major issue is finding a mechanism to ensure that the controlled school ownership body will be representative of the community that it serves. That difficulty has yet to be resolved.

All members are concerned about the lack of satisfactory progress in establishing the sectoral body and an ownership body for controlled schools. The Committee has been told that it will receive an analysis of the Department's controlled schools ownership and representative consultation paper in two or three weeks and, perhaps, a revised policy paper after that. At a meeting on 3 June 2009, the Committee will also hear about the contents of the second Bill, but only its area-planning aspects.

In light of all those issues, the Committee will have to decide whether it has sufficient information to leave such matters in the hands of the Department and the Minister. If the Committee does not get clarity, certainty and sufficient information to gain confidence on certain issues in the Bill within the next three to four weeks, it may wish to consider, for example,

mechanisms by which it and the Assembly might retain some measure of control. Such mechanisms might include an enabling provision, clause or amendment, already discussed in broad terms, on the employment issue. That would require the Department to provide model employment schemes and guidance through secondary legislation.

Members will have received my draft letter to the Minister on behalf of the Committee; the Deputy Chairperson and I approved its circulation to members last week. A slightly updated version, to reflect the Committee's consideration of this week's rather than last week's meeting, has been provided to members. I hope that members have had time to read it and the accompanying table. The table sets out some of the Committee's main concerns according to the relevant clause of, and schedule to, the Bill. It details the information still outstanding and reaffirms that the Committee needs to obtain that from the Department urgently. It lists those clauses and schedules to which amendments may be considered.

I propose that we work our way through the table and consider the relevant paragraphs of the draft letter, including paragraphs 3 and 4, as we go along. After that, we will discuss, as necessary, the remaining paragraphs. Are members content with that approach?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We want to approve the draft letter before going to the table. Although we do not want to rush, I remind members of what I said about efficiency and time, so we will take the letter paragraph by paragraph for members' approval. Do members have their homework books open at the right place?

The title of the correspondence is:

"Education bill-committee for education concerns with and potential amendments to the education bill".

I will begin with paragraph 1. I should point out that the Department's letter does not commit any party to any particular decision; it merely tries to set the context for what members will do over the next few weeks and ensure that the Committee has all the relevant information. I should underline that it is the Department's responsibility to suggest amendments to the Committee. That is preferable because it enables the Committee, the Minister and the Department, to agree a way forward. That is my attempt to condense what the Committee will say in response to this correspondence.

Are members content with paragraph 1?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are members content with paragraph 2?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: If members have objections, please raise them as we go through each paragraph so that we do not have prolonged periods of silence to which the Committee is not used; although they may not be a bad thing sometimes. I see that Chris Stewart gets a mention, so we will pay particular attention.

Mr O'Dowd: I am conscious that the letter does not commit parties to a position; however, I am concerned about the wording of paragraph 3, as some literary licence has been used. Part of the substantive paragraph states:

"The Committee discussed this point at its meeting 20 May and agreed it is clear that it would wish to see the draft amendment(s) to the Bill to make such regulations on schemes of employment (subject to Assembly control)".

That is fair enough, but what does "subject to Assembly control" mean?

The Committee Clerk: The Committee decides whether regulations are subject to negative, affirmative or confirmatory resolution, which are then approved by the Assembly.

Mr O'Dowd: I am happy with that. However, after that statement in paragraph 3, literary licence takes flight. It continues by stating that the Committee would wish to see:

"the terms of the draft subordinate legislation as soon as possible. This would be on the basis of the broad content of the regulations... The acceptability to the Committee of the idea of a Single Employing Authority itself depends upon the Committee being satisfied that the model schemes and guidance will explicitly deliver the maximised autonomy officials have rehearsed in Committee and in various papers."

That is very definitive and asks parties to sign up to a definitive course of action at this early stage. There is no need for any part of paragraph 3 after the words "1 April."

The Chairperson: Do members have views on that? Do you mean that you would amend paragraph 3 by removing the sentence that begins, "The acceptability to the Committee", and ends with "in various papers."? Are you content with the last few lines of paragraph 3, from:

"The Committee sees this as an urgent issue, since it has been informed"?

Mr O'Dowd: I am happy enough to retain the last sentence.

The Chairperson: Therefore your only objection is to the sentence that begins, "The acceptability".

Will members read over that section of the letter and decide whether they want to amend it?

Mr Elliott: What is the issue? Surely that sentence merely says that it is up to the Committee to decide whether to run with the idea of a single employing

authority. It is just a factual statement, although I accept that I might have misunderstood John's point.

Mr O'Dowd: It is much more definitive than a mere factual statement. The sentence reads:

"The acceptability to the Committee of the idea of a Single Employing Authority itself depends upon the Committee being satisfied that the model schemes and guidance".

There is much more to deciding whether I will accept a single employing authority than simply being satisfied with the employment schemes. I am aware that some political parties around the table have concerns about the idea of a single employing authority, but there is no need at this stage of the Bill's scrutiny for the Committee to state definitively that it will reject a component of the Bill based on one issue. Therefore, there is no need for it to be included in the letter.

Mr D Bradley: That is a fair argument, because that point was not put to the Committee, and the Committee has not voted on it.

The Chairperson: We could remove the sentence beginning "The acceptability" down to "various papers" and leave in:

"The Committee sees this as an urgent issue".

Mr Elliott: We could insert the words "and other matters" after:

"being satisfied that the model schemes, guidance"

so that it would read

"being satisfied that the model schemes, guidance and other matters."

That would cover everything.

The Chairperson: Let us deal with the first issue so that we do not get confused. Are we happy to remove "The acceptability" down to "various papers"?

Mr Elliott: No. I suggest that we insert a few words into the sentence to make it more acceptable; it would also allay John's concern. The words "other matters" would not tie us down just to model schemes and guidance. That would leave it open for all the issues to be discussed under the single employing authority.

Mr Lunn: I hear what Tom is saying, but, having reflected on what John said, I do not think that there is any need to have that sentence at all, and removing it does not diminish the effect of the letter. We could be here all day tinkering with the letter.

Mr O'Dowd: Dominic hit the nail on the head. The Committee has not voted on this issue nor has it taken a definitive position on anything. The letter merely highlights the Committee's concerns to the Department. If we start laying down definitive positions, it will be difficult to agree this letter.

The Chairperson: Tom, are you happy enough with that?

Mr Elliott: I would have preferred to add the words that I suggested, but I am not going to die in a ditch over it.

The Chairperson: The last sentence on that point reads:

"The Committee sees this as an urgent issue, since it has been informed that the draft Employment Schemes and guidance are not likely to be available for 'several months'."

Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Do members have further concerns with paragraph 3?

Mr O'Dowd: The wording of the final bullet point of paragraph 3 is unsatisfactory. It states:

"The Committee discussed this at its meeting on 20 May and agreed that the important point here is that a mechanism needs to be found to ensure that the Controlled Sector Ownership Body is to be representative of the community served by the Controlled Sector."

I realise that that is a major concern for some members; nevertheless, the Committee has not agreed that.

Mr Elliott: We could agree it today.

The Chairperson: It is important that members express their concerns. As John said, the Committee has not agreed that, but the purpose of the meeting is to agree whether the issue should be included in the letter.

Mr McCausland: The first sentence states "The Committee noted the line"; that is just a statement of fact. The second sentence states:

"the Controlled Sector Ownership Body is to representative of the community served".

If that were not the case, the controlled sector would be different from other sectors, and throughout our scrutiny we have espoused equality as a fundamental principle.

On a grammatical issue, the sentence states that "it is to representative" — obviously the word "to" should be omitted. Since we have established the principle of equality of representation in other sectors, the controlled sector should be no different. That is important. If it needs to be agreed, it can be agreed; however, I have not heard anybody dissenting from it until now.

Mr O'Dowd: Chairperson, may I remind you of your opening remarks that the letter is not for parties to make definitive decisions but to raise with the Department concerns that were highlighted at the Committee meeting? There are concerns with which I agree and those with which I do not. Why should we pick out a particular paragraph or issue and have a formal vote on it today to ascertain the Committee's agreed position? We may return to it in a week, a fortnight or three weeks and agree it as the Committee's position. There is another

way of wording the letter to enable the Committee to reach agreement today rather than splitting the Committee on a division.

The Chairperson: What is your suggestion?

Mr O'Dowd: I suggest something along the lines of "the Committee has raised and heard concerns", for example.

Mr D Bradley: We could leave out "agreed that the" from the sentence:

"the Committee discussed this at its meeting on 20 May and agreed that the"

so that it reads "and an important point here is that". Would that be acceptable?

Mr O'Dowd: It is acceptable as long as we realise that we will return to it in later discussions; my party is not tying itself to any proposal.

The Chairperson: It recognises it as an issue.

Mr O'Dowd: Which it is.

The Chairperson: Therefore we will take out "and agreed that".

Mr D Bradley: No; we will take out "agreed that the" and replace it with "an" so that it reads "and an important point here is".

The Chairperson: Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: That brings us to paragraph 4.

Mr O'Dowd: I have a problem with the style and presentation of the letter; a great deal of literary licence has been used in the writing of it. It is not how a report from a Committee should be presented.

The Chairperson: It is not a report from the Committee; it is a letter that the Committee Clerk and his staff have drafted as an overview of the concerns that have been raised. We all have personal opinions on the style of various things, but the letter is an attempt to get an overall view. The Committee can make slight changes to it without impinging on any member's views.

Mr O'Dowd: OK.

The Chairperson: Are members content with paragraph 4?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are members content with paragraph 5?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are members content with paragraph 6?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: On a grammatical point, paragraph 7 states:

"With a Bill of the size and complexity of the Education Bill, the Committee will not normally".

Should that be "would not normally"? Is that correct? The teachers among us can keep me right. Are members content with paragraph 7?

Mr Elliott: Does paragraph 7 make it clear that we hope that the Department and the Minister submit amendments?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Elliott: That is fair enough.

The Chairperson: Are members therefore content with paragraph 7?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are members content with paragraph 8?

Mr O'Dowd: I have a problem with the wording of paragraph 8, which states that:

"The major problem we currently have with this Bill, as clearly exemplified earlier in this letter, is that the clarification and information requested by the Committee on some key issues is not forthcoming".

I assume that we are trying to get across the point that our major problem is with scrutinising the Bill — which I do not agree with. However, even so, the sentence is not worded properly.

The Chairperson: Do you want it to be amended so that it reads: "One of the problems we currently have"?

Mr O'Dowd: I assume that the paragraph is trying to get across the point that we have a problem with scrutinising the Bill; I do not agree that there is a problem. We are awaiting important information from the Department; however, I have listened to many, many hours of evidence from the Department that many of the witnesses have repeated. Therefore, we have replicated evidence sessions on several occasions.

The Chairperson: Do you want the sentence to read: "One of the major problems that we currently have"?

Mr Elliott: I think that John is making the point that the major problem that we have is with the scrutiny of the Bill.

Mr O'Dowd: I want the sentence to be reworded to reflect that.

The Chairperson: Do you want the sentence to be reworded to reflect the problems that the Committee has in scrutinising the Bill?

Mr O'Dowd: I realise that I am contradicting myself. It is not my job to defend departmental officials, regardless of whether my party has a say in

how that Department is run. However, the wording of that sentence is somewhat unfair to officials and needs to be reworded.

The Chairperson: Do you have any suggestions?

Mr O'Dowd: Perhaps the sentence could be reworded as follows: "The Committee wishes to scrutinise the Bill effectively, as clearly exemplified earlier in this letter. The clarification and information requested by the Committee on some key issues is not forthcoming within a reasonable timescale, and there appears to be an expectation that the Committee must express more detailed views and proposals to the Department". Does that make any sense?

Mr D Bradley: Say that again. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Elliott: The basis is OK; I do not have an issue with that form of words.

The Chairperson: Therefore, the sentence will start:

"We currently have difficulty in scrutinising the Bill".

Mr Elliott: No, I think that John said:

"The Committee wishes to scrutinise the Bill effectively".

Mr O'Dowd: The sentence that Tom said should be followed by: ", as clearly exemplified earlier in this letter. The clarification and information requested by the Committee on some key issues is not forthcoming within a reasonable timescale". Is that fair enough?

The Chairperson: Did you get that?

The Committee Clerk: I hope so.

The Chairperson: Will you repeat it so that we know exactly what the wording will be?

The Committee Clerk: Paragraph 8 will now read: "The Committee wishes to provide effective scrutiny of the Bill, as clearly exemplified earlier in this letter". Did you want to make any changes to the latter part of the paragraph?

Mr O'Dowd: No.

The Chairperson: We must be absolutely clear on what we have agreed so that there is no confusion. Can you read the sentence again?

The Committee Clerk: "The Committee wishes to provide effective scrutiny of the Bill, as clearly exemplified earlier in this letter."

The Chairperson: Insert a full stop after "letter" and start a new sentence:

"The clarification and information requested by the Committee on some key issues has not been forthcoming within a reasonable timescale".

The Committee Clerk: "has not been"?

The Chairperson: Yes; that makes the sentence grammatically correct.

That brings us to paragraph 9.

Mr Lunn: I take it that the grammar will be tidied up.

The Chairperson: I hope so.

Mr Lunn: The start of paragraph 9 reads "the Committee desired approach" when it should read "the Committee's desired approach". Paragraph 3 also reads:

"the Controlled Sector Ownership Body is to representative"

It should be "to represent" or "be representative of".

The Chairperson: Yes, the word "to" should be taken out. Also, as you pointed out, paragraph 9 should be amended to read "the Committee's desired approach".

Are members content with paragraph 9, subject to that change?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are members happy with paragraph 10?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are members happy with paragraph 11?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: That brings us to the end of the letter. Are members happy to approve the changes that have been agreed?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We now move to the table of the Committee's outstanding concerns about the Bill. I am aware that there is a considerable amount of detail, but we will go through the table item by item. The first item is membership.

Mr O'Dowd: Given that the Committee has not reached any definitive position on the matter, could we use the phrase "Concerns that have been raised by Committee members" rather than "Committee concerns"?

The Chairperson: You mean rather than a generic reference to concerns?

Mr O'Dowd: It could say "have been raised by some Committee members".

Mr Lunn: If we do that, we will have to repeat the phrase throughout the whole table.

Mr O'Dowd: That is what I am suggesting.

Mr Lunn: It could be covered in one sentence.

The Chairperson: As the Assistant Clerk suggested, we could put at the top of the page the line, "Concerns that have been raised by some members."

Mr O'Dowd: That would do.

The Chairperson: Is the Committee happy to go through the table item by item?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: I will give members a couple of minutes to read the paragraph on membership. The format is straightforward: the table lists the clause, the concerns and the implications for the Education Bill, and, where appropriate, any amendments.

Mr Lunn: The third bullet point states that there were concerns about the requirement for a majority of Members to be councillors because of the small membership of the education and skills authority (ESA). Now, this is my view rather than the Committee's view, but the concern was not about having a majority of councillors on a body with such a small membership; rather it was that there should not be a majority of councillors on the board of the ESA, regardless of its size. If the membership happened to be 21 instead of 11, I still do not think that there should be a majority of councillors. That view was shared by stakeholders galore. I propose that we leave out the phrase:

"with the small membership of the ESA".

The Chairperson: And put in the word "and"? So, if the line read "Concerns that the requirement that 'at any time a majority of Members are councillors' and the small membership of the ESA"—

Mr Lunn: No, I am suggesting that we leave out the phrase:

"with the small membership of the ESA"

and have the line read

"Concerns that the requirement that 'at any time a majority of Members are councillors' and the requirement 'that each Member has experience in a field of activity'"

The Chairperson: OK. Are members happy enough with that?

Mr O'Dowd: Will you read that back? Well, it is a concern for Trevor, so it is fair enough.

The Chairperson: We would just remove the phrase:

"the small membership of the ESA".

Are members happy enough that we do that? OK. I will take silence as consent. Are we happy enough with the phrase about membership?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We move on to the next item in the table, 'Committee's and Delegation to Committee's and Staff'. Are members happy enough? It states that:

"alongside a request for a worked up example of what the envisaged change in structure and approx. staffing levels would look like".

I think that we all had issues about what the committee would look like and what its functions would be.

Mr McCausland: Could we remove the apostrophes from the heading 'Committee's and Delegation to Committee's and Staff'?

The Chairperson: Yes, to keep it grammatically correct.

If members are happy, we will move to the next section, 'ESA to employ all staff of grant-aided schools', which deals with clauses 3 to 12. The first line says:

"Concerns to address concerns raised by the GBA, NIVGSBA, NICCE and CCMS etc."

We have put in "etc", but is it possible to list everybody who raised those concerns? Is that line all-encompassing?

Mr McCausland: Those were the only organisations that I can recall.

The Chairperson: Are there any more? I make that point just in case anybody else raised those concerns, but I am not aware of anyone else having done so.

Mr Lunn: What is NIVGSBA?

The Committee Clerk: It is the Northern Ireland Voluntary Grammar Schools Bursars' Association.

Miss McIlveen: If that is the list, we should just remove the "etc."

The Chairperson: Yes, we do not need it.

The Committee Clerk: "Concerns to address concerns" could read "Concerns to address issues" if members are minded that way.

The Chairperson: OK. Are members happy enough?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: That brings us to page 3, which is still under the heading of 'ESA to employ all staff of grant-aided schools'. A lot of it repeats the factual report by Hansard.

Miss McIlveen: Equally, there are those who would not have a problem with that issue and who stated as much in their responses. They were quite definite that they did not have an issue with it.

Mr McCausland: It may be useful, therefore, to include those groups.

Miss McIlveen: It is not very balanced.

The Chairperson: That is a valid point.

Mr D Bradley: Before the list is completed, can we check the Hansard report to ensure that there are no other groups, other than those that are mentioned, that were concerned about that point?

The Committee Clerk: Perhaps the Association for Quality Education (AQE) is an example.

The Chairperson: I suppose the purpose of the table is to raise the concerns that people had. We were then to list all the issues on which people had agreement. That will probably be a fairly long list.

Mr McCausland: On the other hand, other people's concern was that the ESA should be a single employing authority. This is a pretty unique issue in that there were strong views on both sides.

The Committee Clerk: There were 38 submissions in total, members. We had 13 evidence sessions. We tried to highlight the oral evidence and the Committee's discussions on it. If you want the entire 38 submissions to be reflected, that can be done.

The Chairperson: Yes, we do, with particular regard to that issue.

Miss McIlveen: It is a huge issue.

The Chairperson: It is an important issue. Michelle's point is about balance. While concerns were raised about that issue, equally, many oral submissions were received from organisations and bodies that have no difficulty with it. Is it easier to include a final paragraph that would state as much?

Mr Elliott: Yes. That is reasonable.

The Chairperson: That would be fair. What would be the detail of that paragraph? Again, we do not want to hold onto the issue for much longer. In fairness, we have accused other people of not responding in time. We do not want to drag our feet. I do not want the issue to linger for another week. I want it to be dealt with today. A line could be inserted that states that during their presentations, other organisations and bodies did not raise concerns on that particular matter.

Mr McCausland: They actually went further than that and said that they support the idea of a single employing authority.

The Chairperson: It should be stated, therefore, that they did not raise concerns and that they support the idea of a single employing authority.

The Committee Clerk: For instance, the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) said that it supports it.

Miss McIlveen: TRC, the unions and the boards all said that they support it.

The Assistant Committee Clerk: Therefore, the line should state that the Committee is mindful that other stakeholders support the idea of a single employing authority.

Miss McIlveen: That is fine. As long as there is balance, we will not be accused of taking one side or another.

The Chairperson: It is a fair point.

Mr Elliott: To be fair, Chairperson, officials know the line that we are getting at. There is no objection to it. Therefore, I am happy enough to leave that to them and to the Committee staff.

The Chairperson: Are we happy enough?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Thank you for that.

That brings us to page 4, which is a continuation of the issue. That line would go in at the end of the section that is entitled, 'ESA to employ all staff of grant-aided schools', and just before the start of the next section, which is entitled, 'Transfer of Assets, Liabilities and Staff of Dissolved Bodies'.

We will now look at that part, which starts at the bottom of page 4 and takes us through to page 5. I ask members to reflect on it, please.

Mr Lunn: I do not understand what is meant by the words at the middle of the final paragraph on page 5:

"but until the matter is satisfactorily resolved".

Is that what we mean, or do we mean,

"in order that the matter can be satisfactorily resolved"?

The Chairperson: It relates to points that were raised about the representative body. Therefore, it means until that matter is resolved.

The Committee Clerk: The purpose is to allow the Committee time to come to a decision.

Mr McCausland: The final sentence states:

"The Committee needs to consider the detail on these options".

The options that are mentioned include a broader role for the non-statutory representative body. Reference is also made to an element of the education and library boards. Surely we are looking not just at those options but at other options to see how it might be done? Perhaps we should include the words, "on these and other options". The other option is simply to have a statutory body that would be representative.

The Chairperson: So, we will include the words "on these and other options". Are we happy enough with that? Again, that is not being prescriptive.

Mr McCausland: We are also awaiting information on what can be done to produce a statutory body that is truly representative. The other options are, for some people, second-best options.

The Chairperson: That will be included in the letter. We have now reached the end of the table. Are Members happy enough?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We are almost on time; we are doing well. I appreciate members' indulgence. So that there is no confusion, members can, if they wish,

remove those papers from their folders and return them to the clerks, and new ones can be produced. That is just for the good governance of members' folders. I know that members have been very good at keeping their folders up to date.

Mr Elliott: As a matter of practicality, could we have the updated versions of those documents e-mailed to us?

The Chairperson: Yes, that is fine.

We move to the departmental briefing on the education advisory forum. Chris Stewart is joining us again, as well as Eve Stewart. You are very welcome. I refer members to the distributed papers.

Mr Chris Stewart (Department of Education): Good morning. On behalf of the team, I thank you, Chairman, for your kind words on the work that we have done in support of the Committee. We also heard the Committee's comments on where we could, and should, have done better, and we are mindful that we still owe members some information.

We look forward to receiving the Committee's letter and will respond to it with alacrity. From your description of it, it sounds as if it will be extremely helpful, because it will make clear to us the areas in which the Committee wants further work to be done. That will help the Minister to respond to the Committee and, hopefully, reach the point where there will be consensus around at least some of the issues.

My colleague Eve Stewart will give a short presentation on our paper on the education advisory forum, after which we will be happy to take questions.

Ms Eve Stewart (Department of Education): I thought that today you would like to hear a different voice to Chris's. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: We could not possibly comment.

Mr C Stewart: Same tune, different singer.

Ms E Stewart: When the review of public administration (RPA) programme was announced in November 2005, it was stated that there would be a new statutory education advisory forum. The primary focus of the forum will be the provision of advice to the Department of Education (DE) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) on strategic issues in relation to the policy, planning and delivery of education at a very high level.

The intention is not for members of the forum to lobby for their particular groups. The plan is that members will engage in open and robust debate and will strive to offer advice to both Departments that is representative of the consensus view of the forum. Members will not be there to represent their particular bodies; they will be there as part of a participative culture.

The forum will be established as an advisory, non-departmental public body (NDPB), and it will have all

the attendant appropriate governance arrangements. The legislative provisions to establish the forum will be in the second RPA education Bill. It is intended that the power to make regulations to cover more detail on the composition and role of the forum will also be included therein. At present, it is intended that the forum will be established at the same time as the ESA, on 1 January 2010. Of course, that will be subject to the timing of the second Bill's passage through the Assembly.

I will turn now to the structure and membership of the forum. One of the key considerations was the need to provide a balance between the customer side and the supplier side of education. The Department was also keen to hear the voices of those who are not heard through any other formal mechanism. To ensure effective communications, we do not want an overly large body. It is proposed that there will be a maximum of 26 core members, along with a chairperson and a vice-chairperson. Neither the chairperson nor the vice-chairperson will have a vested interest in any education organisation here.

The members will be drawn from three groups: the education sectors, the practitioners of education and the customers of education. I will not go into the detail of the proposed membership; that is contained in a table in our summary paper and in the policy paper.

The chairperson and the vice-chairperson will be appointed by the Minister of Education in consultation with the Minister for Employment and Learning. The appointments will be in accordance with the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA) principles. The other members will be drawn from the groups that they represent, and it is planned that OCPA principles will also apply to those appointments. It is proposed that members will serve a term of up to four years and that the term could be anywhere between two and four years to allow for a rotation of members.

The ESA will not have membership of the forum, and it will not be involved in the development of the forum's annual work plan. The forum will develop an annual work plan, which the chairperson will develop in consultation with DE and DEL. The ESA's involvement in the development of policies will be at an earlier stage, when DE will consult the ESA to try to identify and consider practical implementation issues, which must be taken into account before a draft policy document is passed over to the forum for consideration.

The budget for the forum will be very modest. It is not anticipated that the forum will cost a lot of money. The chairperson and the vice-chairperson will receive an annual allowance, and other members will receive travel subsistence and other reasonable expenses. It is not intended that the forum will have its own premises.

It is anticipated that rooms will be booked at hotels and so on.

The Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning want to ensure that the forum will bring added value to the policymaking process. When Departments give subsequent policy submissions to Ministers and various other people, they will include a copy of the advice that the forum has given to the Ministers and indicate how that has influenced the development of the policy.

Finally, it is intended that the forum will be subject to informal review during its initial year of operation and, thereafter, at regular intervals to identify areas where changes might be needed, for example, in the groups that are represented on the forum.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Eve. Obviously, we are aware of the thinking around the establishment of an education advisory forum. Policy paper 19 states that sectoral bodies are expected to highlight how the policies that are under consideration might affect their particular sector but that they are not to represent their sector. Given that, on the other hand, encouragement is being given to maintain sectoral bodies, how can it be ensured that self-interest will not be paramount in the advisory forum?

Paragraph 6 of policy paper 19 states:

“However, it will be a unique source of advice in that it will be the only group mechanism that has a special advisory relationship with DE and DEL, set in statute.”

If a sectoral body raises a concern on a particular policy to the Department, but the advisory forum has met and come to some other conclusion, does the view of the advisory forum take priority over the concern raised by the sectoral body? In simple terms, is it possible for the advisory forum to gang up and leave one sector — whatever it may be — isolated, with its message unheard?

Mr C Stewart: I think that the answers to both questions are fairly similar. There will always be an understandable tendency, particularly on the part of the sectoral members of the forum, to promote their own self-interests. Clearly, those members will be nominated by the sectors on the basis of their ability to reflect the thinking of those sectors.

We would attempt to discourage that type of behaviour and encourage different types of behaviour by saying that the weight that we would attach to advice from the forum is likely to be directly proportional to the extent to which the forum is able to come to a consensus on matters. Therefore, if there is a broad consensus on an issue throughout the entire forum — which will cover all sectors, a range of practitioners and a range of consumers of education — the Department is likely to attach very considerable weight to its advice on that issue. However, a consensus such as

that is not easily or often achieved. On the other hand, if the forum falls into the trap of simply producing a series of sectoral views without achieving consensus, then it is unlikely that the forum, as a mechanism, will add any value to our policy deliberations or that its advice will carry any weight.

On your second point, it is, of course, important to allow room for an individual sector to take a different view if it feels compelled to do so. We would be worried if the forum ganged up on a particular sector, as you have described it, because we do not want there to be any unfair treatment. However, again, when it comes to us assessing the views that we receive, in general, a broad consensus view from the forum is likely to carry more weight than a minority view from a particular sector.

The Chairperson: This is a personal comment, but if the education advisory forum were to become the Civic Forum of education, how useful and valuable would it be to the education sector? I am not asking you to pass comment on the Civic Forum.

Mr C Stewart: I am relieved, Chairperson.

The Chairperson: Given how the Civic Forum worked and the added value that it brought to whatever its purpose was, I think that people will be very cynical about whether a similar exercise in a very defined area such as education will bring any added value to the education system.

Mr C Stewart: I understand those concerns. Without commenting on the Civic Forum, it is nevertheless an observable fact that on few occasions was the Civic Forum ever able to achieve the sort of consensus that we would want an education advisory forum to achieve. Given that we are dealing with the narrower, but nonetheless complex, field of education, we hope that the risk will be smaller.

It is also incumbent on the two Departments, in setting up the forum and providing it with a secretariat — and I am sure that John and Alyn would agree that the secretariat of any forum or Committee plays an important role — to support the forum. We will not just leave the forum members adrift with that difficult challenge. Without in any way impinging on its independence, the Departments and the secretariat will need to support and advise the forum's members and help them to reach views on those particular issues.

We recognise that danger, which is why the Department's policy paper refers to an early review of the forum's effectiveness. If it fails to provide the clear, consensual advice that we seek, changes to it will be considered later.

The Chairperson: The forum must demonstrably add value to the policymaking process and it is envisaged that it will hold the Department to account. The forum would have no comeback if the Department and the

Minister set aside its views. There is no requirement for the Department or the Minister to take any heed of what comes out of the forum — it can be ignored.

Mr C Stewart: That is correct, and the Department does not want to create a false expectation. As the policy paper states, the advice would be in no way binding. However, it would be incumbent on both Departments to feed-back to the forum. If the Department disagreed with advice, it would have to explain why clearly. That approach is essential and one to which both Departments would want to commit.

Miss McIlveen: I want to know about the role of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), because the Department of Education is paying for and providing the secretariat for the service, even though Eve said that it will be a modest sum. What will DEL contribute to the forum and what will it get from the arrangement?

Mr C Stewart: The potential for DEL to contribute to the costs has not yet been raised by the Department of Education, although the Minister may want to take that up with Sir Reg Empey. Our colleagues in DEL have been aware of this development from the outset and are broadly supportive.

It is fair to say that they have not been as closely involved as we, the lead Department, have. However, they remain committed to the project, as they see value in it and regard it as a useful source of advice in areas of policy for which they are responsible. Without pre-empting ministerial discussions, there is an argument that DEL ought to contribute to the costs.

Miss McIlveen: Is it not incredibly vague? At present, all we have is a requirement in statute.

Mr C Stewart: That is something that Ministers must pursue. I am not aware that the Minister has formally raised it with Sir Reg, but she may wish to.

Miss McIlveen: I also note that the Department of Education will have observer status, whereas DEL's status is not defined in the paper.

Mr C Stewart: If a member of the inspectorate performs the observer role, they could serve both Departments because the inspectorate works for three Departments — Education, Employment and Learning and Culture, Arts and Leisure. However, in addition to the observer, both Departments will have members formally appointed to the forum; therefore, DEL will be represented in that capacity.

Miss McIlveen: How often will the forum meet?

Mr C Stewart: It is envisaged that the full forum will meet six times a year, but that will depend on its effectiveness, on the work pattern that it develops and on the use that it makes of subgroups or subcommittees, which is difficult to gauge at this stage. However, most

of the work is likely to be done in subgroups or subcommittees, which may meet much more often during the year, with their work signed off by meetings of the full forum on fewer occasions.

Miss McIlveen: Are there any costings? Depending on outcomes, “modest” can become astronomical.

Mr C Stewart: It is difficult to say at this stage. The Department has not produced a business case.

Miss McIlveen: What about expenses?

Ms C Stewart: We will have to pay close attention to expenses. A ballpark estimate off the top of my head, and it is no more than that, is £200,000 or £300,000. Even a small secretariat of three staff will quickly take costs into the realm of £100,000. As Eve said, it is not envisaged that the forum will have a headquarters or offices; it will use public sector facilities or hire them if required.

A budget of between £300,000 and £400,000, or perhaps higher, would not be out of the question.

Miss McIlveen: Is a scrutiny mechanism proposed for the forum?

Mr C Stewart: I imagine that the Education Committee would want to scrutinise the work of the forum and its effectiveness.

Mr D Bradley: Point 8 of your summary of policy paper 19 states that one of the key considerations is to achieve a balance between the customer side and the supplier side of education. However, if children and young people and parents were taken as those who represent customers, only four members out of a total membership of 26 would represent customers. A representation of four customers out of a total of 26 members would mean that 22 members of the board were, with one or two exceptions, suppliers. How can you argue that you have achieved a balance between customers and suppliers?

Mr C Stewart: That is a fair point. We are at the consultation stage on that, and we welcome members' views on whether those figures are correct. We recognise the challenge; it is difficult to achieve a balance without making the numbers unworkably large. It is an accurate observation that the proposed number of customers for the board is low. We will have to put considerable thought into ensuring that the presence of children and young people, irrespective of numbers, is in no way tokenistic.

The forum's *raison d'être* will be to allow us to hear from those in the education system from whom we do not normally or easily hear. It is not difficult for us to hear suppliers' views; we talk to them every day. However, we do not find it as easy to create mechanisms to hear the views of parents and children,

and that is where the real added value of the forum will be. That adds weight to your comment.

Mr D Bradley: You said that another key consideration is the need to hear the voices of those who are not heard through any other formal mechanism. On the same point, where is the opportunity for people who represent customers with special needs or disabilities or members of marginalised groups to have a voice in the forum?

Mr C Stewart: That could be addressed in several ways. If the Committee felt that the suggested membership was not correct, that it was not broad enough or that more groups and participants ought to be identified, we would consider that. We also want to ensure that the mechanisms that we use for the appointments process and to encourage nominations for any composition of membership are broadly based. We want to ensure that people from the groups that you mentioned are aware of the process and are encouraged to make nominations.

Mr D Bradley: In the designations that are set out in annex A of policy paper 19, there is no designation for special needs or disability or for marginalised groups such as Irish Travellers or the newcomer population.

Mr C Stewart: That is correct; we have not specifically identified such groups on the consumer side, although we have identified them on the supplier side. We do not want to exclude them, far from it; we want to encourage those groups. If the Committee felt that the composition should be amended in that respect, we would consider that carefully.

Mr D Bradley: I made that point in light of your comment that hearing the voices of those who are not heard through any other mechanism is a key consideration. Perhaps the Department will give more consideration to that area.

Mr C Stewart: That is a fair point.

Mr McCausland: The Civic Forum was mentioned earlier. Having sat through the Bill of Rights Forum, the word “forum” is indelibly etched in my memory — and not in a good way. How will you get two representatives for parents and two for children and young people?

What constitutes “the sector”? A failure to identify was a fundamental flaw in the Bill of Rights Forum. Some small organisations felt that they could represent all the children of Northern Ireland; yet some of them persistently expressed partisan views. If that happened with this forum, it could create difficulties. How would the representatives for parents and children and young people be chosen?

Mr C Stewart: It is very difficult to ask two parents and two children or young people to represent everyone in those groups. That is why Eve stressed the importance of the forum not only having a representative culture or ethos, if I may use that word, but a participative one.

I have had some experience of identifying people who might be nominated to a forum and encouraging them to come forward. When I worked in the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, we had a forum of some 50 children and young people. We cast the widest possible net for nominations by encouraging young people in schools, youth organisations, faith-based organisations and churches to come forward.

Mr McCausland: We are not talking about organisations that purport to represent the children’s sector.

Mr C Stewart: I am not talking exclusively about such organisations.

Mr McCausland: As long as it is inclusive; that is the key point.

Mr C Stewart: We want the forum to be as broadly based as possible. We do not want any child or young person to feel that they have been overlooked or denied the opportunity to come forward.

Mr McCausland: Therefore, children from all backgrounds will be able to submit their names.

Mr C Stewart: Yes.

Mr McCausland: Who would select the representatives?

Mr C Stewart: The Department.

Mr McCausland: Will the same process be used to select representatives from the voluntary and community sector, the voluntary youth sector and trade unions? Will the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) nominate someone or can any trade unionist put their name forward?

Mr C Stewart: We will have to talk to the trade unions about that. I suspect that ICTU will be the most likely route, but we want to be guided by the trade unions.

Mr McCausland: I have some difficulty with that, as, in recent months, some trade unions have expressed strong political views on issues that have nothing to do with trade unions: for example, the ICTU pro-Palestinian demonstration in Belfast city centre. That was an offence to many people because of the way in which it was carried out and the actions associated with it.

Would it not be better to let all card-carrying trade unionists apply rather than allow a trade union that has a political aspect and that is not necessarily representative of all trade unionists and workers in Northern Ireland to nominate someone? If you asked a group whether it would prefer to nominate someone or to open the nominations up to everyone, I have a fair idea what its choice might be. If you leave the nomination with that group, you will get a predetermined outcome. Would it not be better to open the nomination up to all trade unions and let people apply in the same way as every other category?

Mr C Stewart: I understand your point. However, before coming to a conclusion, we will take a view from the trade unions on how a trade union nominee might be identified. We will make it clear to all potential members of the forum that, whatever their political views, the sole focus and function of the forum will be to provide advice on education policy to the two Departments.

Mr McCausland: In the Bill of Rights Forum some people brought their political baggage to the table.

Mr C Stewart: Of course that happens. We cannot expect someone who is nominated to the forum because they represent or have knowledge of a particular sector or component of education to leave their beliefs at the door. Nevertheless, in drawing up the operating rules and protocols for the forum, we will strive to make it clear that we are not interested in creating a body in which people advance or debate sectoral positions with a view to one prevailing over the other.

We are looking for consensus-based advice to Departments. As I said, where that consensus can be found, the advice will carry weight; where it cannot, it is likely to carry very little weight.

Mr McCausland: Would representatives from the community sector simply write to say that they want to be in the forum and departmental officials would interview them?

Mr C Stewart: It is incumbent on us to have the broadest possible recruiting and notification arrangements. We would look to our colleagues in various statutory authorities, particularly in the Department for Social Development, where there are networks and channels of contact with a broad range of community organisations to advise us.

Mr McCausland: The Bill of Rights Forum's experience was that what emerges through the network organisations may not be representative of Northern Ireland as a whole. One could encourage people in the community sector, not all of whom belong to a network organisation. I regard community organisations as anything from a pipe band to an Orange Lodge, but they may not belong to Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA). Umbrella organisations have an important role to play, but one cannot concentrate solely on them; membership of the forum should be open to anyone from a community organisation, including Church organisations.

Mr C Stewart: I agree. There is no intention to be narrow or restrictive in any way.

Mr McCausland: It should be done in a way that does not allow sectoral organisations to guide the forum in a particular direction.

Mr C Stewart: I have no difficulty with that. Someone from an Orange Lodge, for example, would

be in the forum because they would bring a community perspective on the consumption of education; they would not be there to represent the Loyal Orders or any other organisation of which they might be a member.

Mr McCausland: I am simply making the point that an Orange Lodge is just as much a community organisation as Ballygobackwards community group.

Mr C Stewart: Having community organisations on the forum is not to advance the cause of those organisations; it is to find a communication route for consumers of education. It is simply a means of contact or of identifying people who can play a role in a personal capacity on the forum.

Mr Elliott: If the forum ever comes into existence, I wish it well. The Minister has not taken kindly to advice from other bodies in the Province, and I am not sure that this group will fare any better. I am not convinced that it will get off the ground or that it will be what I want it to be.

Like Nelson, I want to ask about the appointments process. Would people have to apply under individual areas? Would someone from a commercial organisation apply under that area as well as under the area of voluntary and community organisations?

Mr C Stewart: Yes.

Mr Elliott: Would they submit two application forms?

Mr C Stewart: We would not ask them to submit two application forms. We would ask anyone who applies to tell us what they could bring to the forum. An individual who felt that they could bring a commercial, an Irish-medium, community, teaching or parents' perspective would add to the weight of their application.

Mr Elliott: It will be interesting to see the appointments criteria.

Mr C Stewart: I have no doubt that the Committee will want to scrutinise that.

Mr Elliott: Can you highlight the areas where membership will come from the nominated sectors?

Mr C Stewart: They are mentioned in table 7, but they are not exclusive.

It is likely that most applicants representing Irish-medium education would be put forward by Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta. However, that body does not have an exclusive right to nominate; others in the Irish-medium sector could put themselves forward.

Mr Elliott: Therefore just because a sector nominates you does not mean that you automatically represent it on the forum.

Mr C Stewart: That is correct.

Mr Elliott: My understanding of point 9 on page 10 was that representatives would be appointed by their respective sectors. Is that not the case?

Mr C Stewart: No. All appointments will be made by the Department. Nominations may come from sectoral bodies, individual members of the public or, indeed, anyone else; however, appointments will be departmental.

Mr Elliott: In other words, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) could nominate a person, but there could still be 10 other applicants from the integrated sector.

Mr C Stewart: Yes. However, our intention is that the composition of the forum will be broadly based and, as far as possible, will reflect the composition outlined in the table. It is important to draw a distinction between illustrating the composition that we seek and the sources that we have identified as nominees while making it clear that appointments will be made by the Department.

Mr McCausland: Therefore, even if the Irish Congress of Trade Unions nominates a trade union representative, that does not stop Jimmy Brown, who is a sheet metal worker and a trade union member, putting forward his own name.

Mr C Stewart: That is correct.

Mr McCausland: The Department will consider all those applicants equally.

Mr C Stewart: That is correct.

Mr Elliott: Supposedly. I have heard enough, Chairperson.

The Chairperson: That was not how it was normally done, was it?

Mr C Stewart: We never had a forum before.

The Chairperson: The forum is a non-departmental public body. At present, when a non-departmental public body is established, a nominee, say, John Smith, is put forward by the controlled sector's representative body, for example, as it is one of the sectors that have been identified. However, if someone from the controlled sector put forward his or her own name, he or she would be considered equally.

Mr C Stewart: Yes; there is no reason why not.

The Chairperson: Therefore the nominating body does not have preferential treatment over the sector as a whole.

Mr C Stewart: That is not what we propose. The alternative would be to give certain sectoral bodies or organisations formal guaranteed nominating rights in legislation. That approach is technically more difficult and would require us to give careful consideration to ensure that we do not fall foul of equality legislation or

of the oft-mentioned section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

As we point out in the policy paper, sectors and groups change and new interests emerge. A degree of flexibility on the forum's membership is needed to ensure that it continues to meet its core objective of being broadly based and giving us the broad range of voices that we need to hear. That is why we are not minded to give sectors formal, fixed nomination rights in statute. However, it is possible to do it in that way.

Mrs M Bradley: Can you explain what you mean by "commercial organisations"? What organisations are you talking about?

Mr C Stewart: We are likely to phrase that in legislation as, "organisations that represent the interests of industry, commerce and the professions". Although education is extremely important for its own sake, it is also important because it fuels and drives the economy; therefore we want to hear from those who steer the economy about whether our education policies deliver what they need. For example, we want to hear from chambers of commerce, chambers of trade, and representative organisations from any aspect of commerce and the economy.

Mr B McCrea: The usual suspects.

Mr C Stewart: I would not necessarily use that phrase, but it is a pithy description.

The Chairperson: What autonomy will the forum have to determine its work programme and agenda? Would they be set by the permanent secretary, the Department or the Minister, or will the forum have autonomy to decide the issues that it wishes to address?

Mr C Stewart: The agenda will be set by the two Departments. The expectation is that the forum will provide advice on matters that are referred to it by the two Departments; therefore it will not set its own work programme.

The Chairperson: What would the forum do if it wanted to express a view on an issue that had not been referred to it by the two Departments?

Mr C Stewart: The forum would simply not be permitted to advise on an issue that had not been referred to it by one or other of the Departments; that is not the policy intention. If the forum disagreed with the work programme or felt that it wished to advise on something that the Departments had not referred to it, it would be free to approach the Minister with that suggestion. However, it would be for the two respective Ministers to decide which topics they referred to the forum.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Chris and Eve.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

27 May 2009

EDUCATION BILL (NIA 3/08)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Nelson McCausland
Mr John O'Dowd
Mrs Michelle O'Neill

Witness:

Mr Chris Stewart } Department of Education

The Chairperson (Mr Storey): The Committee agreed at last week's meeting to look in some detail at clauses 1 and 2 of the Education Bill, which deal with the creation of the education and skills authority (ESA), its functions, and the general duty of schedule 1, which deals with the ESA membership committee arrangements. We had also intended to consider clauses 3 to 12; however, after speaking to the Committee Clerk this morning I felt that we were trying to cram too much into too short a time. Unfortunately, the members of one of the parties are not present, which puts us in a slightly difficult position. Nevertheless, we should consider clauses 1 and 2 and schedule 1.

At last week's meeting we amended and approved a letter to the Minister regarding the Committee's concerns and outstanding requests for information. In that letter the Committee made it clear that its preferred course of action is to reach agreement with the Minister and her officials on any amendments to the Education Bill. The letter also stressed the Committee's urgent need to receive some of the information that is still outstanding, and we will await any papers in that regard.

In fairness to the Minister and the Department, it would be worthwhile for the Committee to know whether the Department is to propose any amendments on which we can agree and work together. We still have no

indication whether those will be made available to us by next week, but we are working towards that.

Members and education stakeholders have expressed their concerns during our evidence sessions, and we have also had the benefit of a response by departmental officials to those concerns. However, I remind members that there is no guarantee that the Minister will propose amendments that address members' concerns.

The Committee should urgently consider the Bill and arrive at decisions on amendments. Given that the Committee has only five scheduled meetings before the summer recess, it is imperative that we commence our scrutiny; members should consider the provisions of each clause and express their views on what amendments, if any, they support. Members may want to suggest amendments as proposed changes in principle, rewording or additional wording. Moreover, members should consider what further information and clarification are required from the Department or stakeholders to satisfy our concerns.

The Committee's objective in today's session and in further clause-by-clause sessions is to arrive at as clear a position as possible; that will allow the Committee to communicate its clear view to the Department and the Minister on appropriate amendments. If the Department and the Minister do not agree with the Committee, we will have to decide whether to pursue our own amendments. Having a clear view on those issues will allow us to draw up our own amendments for consideration.

I am sure that all members have brought a copy of the Bill; if not, they will be marked down. Furthermore, I draw members' attention to the spreadsheet that John, Alyn and their staff have prepared for us. Given the raft of information from oral sessions during the past weeks, I want to place on record the Committee's appreciation of their work in creating a coherent document that we can follow logically.

Members should mark clause 1, "The Education and Skills Authority", into their books — this is like a classroom — and return to schedule 1. I refer members to paragraphs 2(1)(b), 2(2)(a) and 2(2)(b) of schedule 1. The concerns about the membership of the ESA are outlined on page 1 of the table that is attached to the Committee's letter to the Minister of the 20 May. Are members content to continue in this format?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Clause 1(1) states:

"There shall be a body corporate known as the Education and Skills Authority (referred to in this Act as "ESA")."

It would be useful to go through each line of schedule 1. I suspect that paragraphs 5 and 10 are standard inclusions in any schedule.

Schedule 1(2)(1) states that membership of the ESA shall consist of:

“(a) a Chair, and

(b) not fewer than 7 or more than 11 other members appointed by the Department.”

The Association of Northern Ireland Education and Library Boards (ANIELB) and the Association for Quality Education (AQE) raised issues to which the Department responded thus:

“The Department notes the Association’s comments on the membership of the ESA. This matter has been raised by a number of stakeholders, and the Committee is familiar with the Minister’s position.”

The Department’s response continued:

“The AQE has expressed concern that the ESA will be a highly centralised organisation, and that this will impair its effectiveness in delivering key services. The Department emphasises that the ESA will be a single organisation, but with a strong and significant local presence. Back office functions will be centralised in the interests of efficiency and effectiveness. However, the main role of the ESA will be to provide front-line support services to schools and other education providers. These services will continue to be provided locally, and this will be the major factor in determining the structure of the organisation at local level.”

The spreadsheet also outlines issues that were raised by the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB), the Western Education and Library Board (WELB), head teachers and the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education (NICCE).

Is there anything that the Committee feels should be amended or changed? I remind members that we are not taking a decision this morning; I just want to get a sense of members’ views on that element of the Bill.

Mr Lunn: Although I have not studied the spreadsheet in great detail, it seems that all the witnesses had a problem with the proposed membership of the ESA, as a membership of between eight and 12, including the chairperson, did not seem sufficient to provide the necessary spread of expertise and experience. Some, although not so many, had a problem with the fact that a majority of members must be councillors. I have a problem with that aspect of the ESA’s membership, and I was beginning to think that perhaps I was not the only member to do so.

As you said, Chairman, we are not going to make a decision today. If you asked me what I want, I could not tell you today, but I certainly do not want councillors to comprise the majority of the membership of the ESA. I have no problem with councillors having significant representation on the ESA; someone suggested 40%, which is fine.

Mr D Bradley: What is the Department’s position on the size of the ESA’s membership?

The Chairperson: Can we bring Chris Stewart in at this stage?

The Committee Clerk: That has not been organised. If members wish to bring Chris in —

The Chairperson: Chris, are you happy to come to the table?

Mr Chris Stewart (Department of Education): I knew that I would not get a week off, Chairman.

The Chairperson: We would appreciate it.

Mr Lunn: I meant to ask whether particular bodies should have representation on the ESA as of right. There is an active lobby to have the Transferor Representatives’ Council (TRC) involved in the membership of the ESA, and I support that.

Mr D Bradley: What is the Department’s position on the number of members of the ESA?

Mr Stewart: The Department’s position is that the number of members stipulated in the Bill should stand; however, we made the Minister aware of members’ views. Trevor summed it up neatly: most, if not all, stakeholders who have given evidence to the Committee raised concerns about the number of members of the ESA and whether councillors should comprise the majority of its membership. The Minister is considering her position on those issues but has not yet indicated whether she is minded to make any changes.

Mr D Bradley: Could the ESA be described as an arm’s-length body of the Department, in the same way as Sport Northern Ireland is an arm’s-length body of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure?

Mr Stewart: I am not familiar enough with the relationship between Sport Northern Ireland and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to say whether that is a good analogy. It is fair to say that it is an arm’s-length body; however, that is not to say that there will not be a strong measure of accountability between the ESA and the Minister. Given the importance of the public service that the ESA will be responsible for and the size of its budget and workforce, it may be an arm’s-length body but it will not be stand-alone.

Mr O’Dowd: It is our view that there is a democratic imperative that elected members comprise the majority of the membership of the ESA. We remain to be convinced that the number of members of the ESA should be increased; we do not have a firm view about that as yet. Trevor asked whether representative bodies such as the TRC should have a place on the ESA as of right. We do not see the necessity for such a right; in any case, there are legal barriers to such a proposition.

Mr McCausland: I am not hung up on numbers; I am open to persuasion on the issue. However, the notion that any particular group should have automatic representation on the ESA is an equality issue. If one group has automatic membership, others, such as the Catholic bishops, would say that they were entitled to

a place as of right. That would lead to the entire membership being appointed, and there would be no open recruitment because no places would be left.

Mr Lunn: That would depend on how many places there were.

Mr McCausland: Five or six sectors will seek representation on the ESA, including the Irish-medium lobby, the integrated schools' movement, the Catholic bishops and the TRC. We would get to a point at which there were only two or three places available to be filled by open recruitment. The role of the TRC and the Protestant Churches is a fundamental issue, but this is not the most appropriate way to address that.

How will the Department ensure that political representation on the ESA, assuming that people are competent to serve on the body, reflects the political reality of Northern Ireland?

Mr Stewart: Following advice from the Commissioner for Public Appointments, we understand that it is possible for the arrangements to be centralised under the merit principle but to allow for a degree of leeway. It is not a strict requirement to appoint members on nothing but merit; that is to allow a balance to be struck on gender, geographical and political representation. However, we cannot have an overt mechanism such as d'Hondt in the arrangements, with the explicit intention of achieving a political balance. That, ironically, would be unlawful.

Mr McCausland: I have some concerns because that would depend on the goodwill of the person making the appointments — the Minister.

Mr Stewart: Yes; it would be the Minister.

Mr McCausland: After all, a Minister might not have the full confidence of the entire Assembly.

Mr Stewart: I do not think it appropriate for an official to comment on that in relation to any Minister. With respect, I will decline to do so.

Mr McCausland: I am only speculating that such a situation could exist. I am concerned that there is an understanding that that will be taken into account. The difficulty is that such an appointment process would depend on a trust and goodwill that may not exist.

Mr Stewart: The Minister is aware that if the arrangements were based solely on the merit principle, the ESA could have an unusual gender, geographical or political membership. The informal advice that we have had, which we will follow up with formal advice from the Commissioner for Public Appointments, is that it is possible to construct appointment arrangements that allow sufficient leeway to manage the process so that we do not have a perverse outcome. There is a difference between that and including overt mechanisms to achieve a particular political or gender balance.

Mr McCausland: You talk about perverse outcomes and outcomes that are not perverse. Would that cover party political as well as broad political opinion? For example, all the unionist representatives could be drawn from one political party to the exclusion of another.

Mr Stewart: I will answer that generally. The Minister is aware of the difficulty that would be caused if any particular composition of the education and skills authority did not lead to the broadest possible trust and confidence in the organisation in doing its job. However, it is possible, within the arrangements, to mitigate that risk, which is, as I understand it, the Minister's intention.

Mr McCausland: What would be required to enable appointments to be made under the d'Hondt mechanism?

Mr Stewart: At the risk of giving you an answer that you have heard before, it would take a change to section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The difficulty is that applying d'Hondt would amount to discrimination on the grounds of political opinion, whereas reserving a number of places for councillors does not; that would be discrimination on political status, which is not unlawful. Discrimination on political opinion is.

You might ask how it is possible to use the d'Hondt mechanism as we do. The answer is that the d'Hondt mechanism is in Westminster legislation, which is not bound by section 6 as the Assembly is.

Mr McCausland: I would like that issue to be explored further. An understanding is all very well, but if it is not written down in black and white it can be forgotten about. The issue of education, as the Committee is only too well aware, is controversial and contentious in many ways. It is of fundamental importance to our society; therefore we should consider a legislative way of ensuring that the membership of the ESA reflects political reality.

Mr D Bradley: An education and library board has 35 members and covers a fifth of the area that the ESA will cover, why does the Department think that a third of the number that makes up an education and library board will be sufficient for the board of the ESA?

Mr Stewart: A key factor that drove the size of the membership of education and library boards was that those bodies were intended to be representative from the outset. Therefore, in order to get sufficient spread it was necessary to have membership of that size to include local council, TRC and trustee membership; that is in the legislation. Since the ESA is not intended to be a representative body, its board or membership was intended to be small and of a size effective for the discharge of its business, as opposed to securing a broad representation of interested parties.

Mr D Bradley: Since the ESA will have responsibility for education in all of Northern Ireland, it strikes me that 11 members will not be sufficient. It might be restrictive because it might be difficult to ensure that councillors have the required range of expertise. A bigger board would be desirable to allow for a greater range of independent expertise.

Mr Stewart: That is a valid view that we have put to the Minister and which she is considering. We have included in the Bill a provision to enlarge the membership by means of an Order if it proves necessary to do so. Therefore, the choice is whether the Committee is satisfied with that fallback mechanism, which would allow us to enlarge the membership later if it was thought necessary, or whether the Committee wishes the Bill to be amended so that we can enlarge the membership from the outset. Either way, the Committee would be confident that the ESA would not be left with a membership that is too small to do the job, even under the legislation as it stands. Therefore, if the membership were too small, there would be a mechanism in place to make a rapid change and to appoint more members.

Mr D Bradley: I agree that a huge membership could become cumbersome and might not help the smooth running of the organisation; however, too small a membership could create its own problems.

Mr Stewart: That is correct, given the importance of the committee work that will be done in the ESA.

Mr D Bradley: There is a balance to be struck between a huge membership and one that is too small, and I am not sure whether the membership proposed in the Bill strikes that balance.

Mr Lunn: We are constantly told that we are creating the biggest ever organisation in Northern Ireland with the smallest ever board. I assume that the composition of the education and library boards has a statutory basis; it is set up in legislation. That is what we are trying to achieve here. How can legislation give organisations such as the TRC membership of boards as of right but we cannot construct a Bill to do the same thing? We are constantly told that the Bill refers to education Orders going back to the 1950s. It would be much easier if the slate were wiped clean and a brand new Bill introduced, because we could all understand it better. That said, the Bill could refer to the legislation that formed the education and library boards; in fact, it probably does.

Mr Stewart: You raise several points. The watershed is the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which defines the legislative competence of the Assembly; therefore any legislation made after that date must comply with its provisions. Education and library board members are appointed in accordance with the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, which predates the

Northern Ireland Act 1998. Therefore, there are provisions in legislation that were lawful and proper at the time but for which the Assembly could not legislate in a similar way today.

It is possible to cleave existing provisions on the statute book, and they continue to have effect. That is the solution that we are following as regards maintaining the TRC guaranteed membership of school boards of governors. That is possible only by leaving the existing legislation intact.

There would be many advantages if we were to wipe the slate clean, as you say, and start with a clean piece of legislation. However, one of the downsides would be that we might wish to retain some provisions in current legislation but be unable to do so because we could not re-enact them.

Mr Lunn: I am not saying that there is any suggestion of obstruction here, but we seem to be using previous legislation to prove that we cannot do what appears to be clearly right.

Mr Stewart: Whether an issue is clearly right or not is a matter for —

Mr Lunn: Clearly desirable, then.

Mr Stewart: Whether something is clearly desirable is a matter for the Committee to comment on; it is not for me to comment on. I can merely advise you on what is legally possible and what is not. Some things that were possible in 1986 are not possible today.

Mr Lunn: We are drafting legislation here. Anything is possible if we put it into the Bill.

Mr Stewart: With respect, that is not quite correct. This is one area where that is simply not possible. The Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the Westminster Parliament remain sovereign in that respect, and that has placed quite significant restrictions on the legislative competence of the Assembly and the administrative competence of Departments in what we are permitted to do.

That issue was explored in detail by colleagues in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in relation to membership of the library authority. They received very clear advice from senior counsel that it simply was not possible to employ a d'Hondt-type mechanism when deciding the membership of the library authority. Exactly the same situation applies here.

Mr Lunn: I am not suggesting d'Hondt. This is getting even more complicated. It is Westminster's fault that we cannot do what appears to be clearly desirable and wanted by the population and the Committee.

Mr Stewart: That is a fair point. As I told the Committee before, section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 is an extremely blunt instrument. I am not certain that those who drafted section 6 had this

particular situation in mind. Nevertheless, the effect of the section is quite clear.

Mr McCausland: The difficulty is that schools are very different from libraries. When one has discussions about libraries, one does not get quite the passion and range of representations that we are getting here. One does not have integrated libraries, Catholic libraries, Irish-medium libraries or whatever. There are just libraries. Therefore, this is a totally different and special situation.

We should not rule out, or allow others to rule out, the possibility of legislative change at Westminster. If that is what it takes to get education in the right shape in Northern Ireland, and if it is in order to advance the principle of equality, then how could they possibly stand in the way of that? It would seem the most natural thing for us and for all parties to ask for, and for Westminster to deliver, because it would advance the cause of equity across the education system.

The Chairperson: The way that the Bill is numbered is an absolute minefield. The simplest approach is to turn to page 31 of the Bill and the heading "Membership". Paragraph 2(2)(b) states the Department will secure:

"that each member has experience in a field of activity relevant to the discharge of the functions of ESA."

How do we determine whether a person has experience in a field of activity relevant to the discharge of the functions of the ESA? Is it simply enough that they were a teacher, worked for an education and library board, or were a school caretaker? What would be the definition of experience?

Mr Stewart: There would not be a formal definition that would go any further than that. However, the three examples that you gave would be very weighty examples and would count as very significant experience. Likewise, so would, for example, experience of running a large organisation, delivering a public service, managing a large budget, managing a large workforce and managing or delivering youth services. Therefore, it is a very broad provision.

We must attempt to ensure that we address one of the issues that Trevor raised. Although the ESA will have a small membership, it should have the skills, experience and competence that are necessary to manage the delivery of a key public service. There are many different routes by which the necessary experience can be gained. We do not want the Bill to be too prescriptive in tying that down.

Mr Lunn: Chris has just mentioned six areas of expertise. However, there are only 12 places on the ESA, and seven of those will be filled by councillors.

The Chairperson: Let us set aside the seven councillors for a moment. What will govern the appoint-

ments of the other four members? Will it be experience of education, of finance, of running a —

Mr Stewart: The same experience requirement applies to all members, both councillors and non-councillors.

The Chairperson: Therefore, in that respect, each individual is a member of the overall 11, rather than of the groups of seven or four members.

Mr D Bradley: I sit on the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, and in the aftermath of the difficulties experienced by the Northern Ireland Events Company, we did a lot of work on arm's-length bodies. A protocol is now in place whereby members of the boards of arm's-length bodies — and the ESA is a type of arm's-length body — must undergo rigorous training to ensure that they are fit for purpose. They must have the proper expertise to perform the required functions and to operate an organisation efficiently and effectively.

You said that you will initially identify people who have the relevant and appropriate experience. Does the Department view compulsory training as an important element of membership of the ESA board?

Mr Stewart: Yes, absolutely. It is essential that the ESA board is fully trained and competent and that it takes account of the issues that you have raised. For example, it is essential that one of the members is in a position to chair the audit and risk committee, which I am sure the organisation will have. That person must be experienced and competent and have an understanding of audit and financial management and the very issues that you considered in respect of the Northern Ireland Events Company.

The Chairperson: Chris, I appreciate your giving evidence today, because you were not briefed that that would happen.

Mr Stewart: I had an inkling. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: It never crossed my mind to ask you until I saw you this morning.

In the table of stakeholder comments, the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) said that:

"Until the standing rules and orders (SROs) for the new ESA are available it is extremely difficult to make meaningful comments. In the interests of operational efficiency the Board believes the size of ESA should not exceed 12 members, and also welcomes the provision for delegation of functions in 8 (1)."

Will the standing rules and orders be agreed by the ESA itself, or will they be separate from what we are considering in the schedule?

Mr Stewart: They are separate in that they are not part of the schedule. However, the standing orders of the ESA will be subject to the Department's approval.

Mr Lunn: On the issue of membership, paragraph 2(1)(b) of schedule 1 states that the ESA should have:

“not fewer than 7 or more than 11 other members, appointed by the Department.”

Will the Commissioner for Public Appointments have some input? Does “appointed by the Department” actually mean appointed by the Minister?

Mr Stewart: We are indivisible. The Minister is the Department, and the Department is the Minister.

Mr Lunn: A lot of the comments refer to the Minister, but the Bill refers to the Department. Could the Bill refer to the Department in conjunction with the Commissioner for Public Appointments?

Mr Stewart: That would be an unusual approach. Those particular appointments will fall within the commissioner’s formal regulatory framework. The Minister has already made clear that the appointment arrangements will take full account of the principles in the commissioner’s guidance. The approach that we adopt will be whatever the Commissioner for Public Appointments deems to be best practice.

Mr Lunn: As with any other senior public appointment, when the Department produces a list of potential appointees, that must be scrutinised by the Commissioner for Public Appointments. If the commissioner did not agree with that list or felt that there had been some sort of political bias, to what extent would the Minister have to take note of that advice?

Mr Stewart: The commissioner will scrutinise the arrangements and the process that we follow. The Minister may wish to have an observer from the commissioner’s office involved in the arrangements, although she has not decided on that yet. That is done from time to time, and it is a positive step. It is helpful for Departments to have someone from the commissioner’s office present to keep officials right as they operate the procedures. There will be scrutiny, and if the commissioner feels that something that has been proposed or carried out is sub-par or suboptimal, she will quickly make the Department aware of it.

Mr Lunn: The Commissioner for Public Appointments recently gave evidence to the Public Accounts Committee in relation to the NI Events Company and similar conflicts of interest. She gave the impression that she was quite frustrated by her lack of independence. I detected that she thought that her advice was not always followed and did not have to be followed. That is why I am asking the question.

Mr Stewart: It is difficult for me to comment on the legislation governing the powers of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. That is for my colleagues in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to comment on. However, the Minister has emphasised that she regards it as extremely important that the arrangements that are put in place follow best practice, and are clearly seen to do so. I have no doubt that the

Minister will take seriously any advice that the commissioner offers on how to go about that.

Mr D Bradley: Did you say that the councillors who would be members of the ESA would reflect the political make-up of Northern Ireland?

Mr Stewart: I cannot go so far as to say that. The merit principle will be central to the arrangements. The arrangements will be based on establishing criteria against which candidates will be assessed. If I can oversimplify it, there will be a pass mark, and a pool of potential candidates who have exceeded that pass mark or met the criteria will be determined. It is not necessary for the Minister to follow strict merit order in appointing candidates if that would produce a result that might be perceived as being inequitable in some way. Although the merit principle must always be uppermost in the Minister’s mind, she can select people for appointment from that pool in order to try to achieve a balance, or better balance, of political viewpoints. However, the Minister is not trying to achieve one particular outcome or a membership of a certain shape.

Mr D Bradley: Under the current draft of the Bill, it is not inconceivable that the majority of councillors on the board could be from the same political party as the Minister. The challenge role of the board members would be severely lessened under those conditions. Surely that would be a cause for concern for everyone. Is there no mechanism in place for ensuring that that does not happen?

Mr Stewart: It would be the Minister’s intention to ensure that that does not happen. Theoretically, the arrangements could mean that the board could comprise 12 men or 12 women from one town, or 12 people from one political persuasion. However, the Minister is on record as saying that it is important to have local democratic accountability in the membership. She is also on record as stressing the importance of equality. I am sure that the Minister will take those factors into account when she is selecting people for appointment to the board.

Mr D Bradley: The legislation will not apply to the current mandate, but it will apply to future mandates. Therefore, surely we need to have a guarantee in the legislation that a situation will not arise whereby the challenge function and role of the board is in any way compromised.

Mr Stewart: I am not exactly sure what you mean by the challenge role of the board. It will not be the board members’ function to challenge the Minister; it will be the other way around. There will be an accountability relationship between the ESA members and the Minister. I do not see it as a challenge role.

Mr D Bradley: Surely the board will have the role of challenging the senior officials in the ESA.

Mr Stewart: Yes, very much so.

Mr D Bradley: If the situation arose where the majority of members were from the same party as the Minister, that challenge role might be lessened.

Mr Stewart: I am not certain that that would be the case. One of the things that we have attempted to do in the legislation is to make clear the relationship between the Minister of the day, the Department and the ESA. There have been times in the past when our colleagues in the education and library boards have seen that relationship differently to how we see it. They do not necessarily agree that there is a clear line of accountability between education and library boards and the Minister. What view one might take on that is a matter for oneself, but we have sought to put the matter beyond doubt in the legislation. The relationship between the ESA and the Minister will be one of accountability.

The Chairperson: The Committee is now inquorate, but we are not taking any decisions, so we can continue.

Mr Stewart: I am happy to be co-opted.

The Chairperson: We thought that you were already an honorary member.

Irrespective of who the current Minister is or who the future Minister will be, surely a mechanism must be put in place to give people confidence that the board members will not simply be appointed on the whim of the Minister of the day. The Minister continually tells us about equality, so, if this is about equality, why is there a fear of putting equality legislation in place to deliver that intention? I have heard many times in this Committee and in other places that it does not matter how well intentioned people are, if something is not written into the Bill, it cannot be guaranteed.

We go back to the core issue, which is section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. If we want to get to a place where everyone believes that we are operating in a fair and equitable manner, surely the legislation should be changed to remove that legal impediment. That was a sticking point in the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, and you were right to refer to that, Chris. They kept saying that they could not do a particular thing because of legislation in Westminster, but no one ever went to Westminster and asked for it to be changed. Nelson made the point that we do not have maintained libraries, Irish-medium libraries or independent libraries; we just have libraries. However, different sectors deliver education here; it is a completely different ball game. There are concerns about that.

I am interested in members' comments, because I want to draw a line under the matter at this point. We have had a good discussion, but I want to ask members some questions. Although we cannot take a decision

on the matter, is there a view that we should consider an amendment to section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 in order to reach a position in which proper mechanisms and controls are in place that assure everybody that the system is fair? I ask that question in light of comments about how appointments would be made. Another issue is the overall number of ESA members; should there be 12 or another number? Of course, the first part influences the second, because if section 6 is changed, the d'Hondt principle could be used to appoint the elected representatives.

Mr Stewart: I could assist members in responding to your point. The need to amend section 6 would arise most sharply if there was a desire to use a mechanism such as d'Hondt or a desire to meet the TRC request for it to be guaranteed membership of the board.

It may not be necessary to amend section 6 if one adopts the approach that Nelson suggested, which reflects a broader requirement for the membership to be representative of the community in the way that the membership of the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission is required to be. I add the caveat that I would need to talk to the lawyers about that matter. However, it does not strike me that that idea would cause as many problems with section 6 as some other approaches would.

That crystallises the issue, which is: does the Committee want the membership of the ESA to be representative, or should membership be driven by competence or the need to ensure that it is able to manage the services for which it is responsible? The Bill's approach has placed an emphasis on ensuring that the ESA has the skills and competence to run the service while recognising the importance of equality, trust and confidence. The alternative approach would shift the emphasis: if the desire is to, first and foremost, create a body that is representative and that, as a secondary requirement, has skills and competence, the legislation would be framed very differently. The Minister's approach is very much to place competence at the top of the list and to ensure that the board is fit for purpose.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that we could change the emphasis and avoid amending section 6?

Mr Stewart: I think that it may be possible, but not quite in the way that was suggested by some stakeholders. The TRC made the point that it is seeking —

The Chairperson: It is seeking representation.

Mr Stewart: That is simply not possible.

The Chairperson: The Committee recognises the problems that that would create.

Mr Stewart: There are more than three Protestant Churches; we cannot simply pick out three.

The Chairperson: Moreover, there is a raft of other organisations that could say that if one body has a right, they also should have a right. That could start a legal debate that would also touch on their place on education and library boards.

Mr Stewart: It is possible, and Nelson summed it up neatly earlier. It is probably possible, if that is not an oxymoron, to draft a provision that would allow for a broadly based representative body. Whether that is a wise idea is another question.

Mrs O'Neill: There must be some balance. The body needs skills and competency, but it must also be representative. The challenge is to incorporate those elements. Experience in the field is relevant, but the body needs to be representative, too. That is not easy.

Mr Stewart: It is not an easy one. It is a political question as to whether or not the membership of public organisations ought to be representative in character or more executive in character. The Bill's approach is to take the executive line.

Mr D Bradley: I would be more concerned about the range of expertise in a body with just 11 members. That number would be restrictive.

The Chairperson: My next comment in no way casts aspersions on my council colleagues — I should say our council colleagues, and then we will all be condemned. If membership of the ESA is limited to seven or 11, the spread of expertise will also be limited, particularly given the number of council representatives that will sit on it.

Mr Stewart: There is no doubt that the larger the membership, the easier it will be to ensure that there is the necessary spread of competence. The Minister's view is that it is possible to ensure that level of competence with a membership of 12.

Mr D Bradley: I would have thought that a membership of about 20 would allow for a range of expertise.

The Chairperson: Would you still favour a split whereby the majority of the members would be elected representatives?

Mr D Bradley: Yes.

The Chairperson: Do members have any other views? Trevor, you have rehearsed your point well, but I am not stopping you from repeating it.

Mr Lunn: I am not going to repeat it. However, if section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 had to be tinkered with in some way and Westminster could see that we were being constructive and trying to make progress — after all, this is a major piece of legislation and we are talking about a big problem — I would have thought that Westminster would look benignly on our request as long as we were not trying to break the

rules completely. The impression seems to be that asking Westminster to make a change to basic legislation is a terrible thing. Nowadays, legislation can be passed in a couple of days. Look at the how quickly the criminal justice legislation went through Westminster — if you blinked, you would have missed it.

The Chairperson: Their minds are on other issues at the minute.

Mr Stewart: I do not emphasise that point because I think that it presents any sort of insurmountable technical challenge; technical challenges can be overcome quite quickly, and, indeed, frequently are. The issue is the significance of section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It stems directly from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and is rather central to it. Any change to it would be very significant. It is not for me to anticipate what might be said at Westminster, but in view of the seriousness and significance of that section, I am sure that the Secretary of State would want to consider any change to it very carefully. There may well be a particular purpose in mind here for the education sector and that may have a broad measure of support, but the Secretary of State would also have to consider what further ramifications or unexpected consequences there might be were any change to be made to section 6.

The Chairperson: On a previous occasion, you mentioned two other pieces of legislation that dealt with the promotion of Irish-medium education and integrated education. I think that they flowed from the Belfast Agreement. Are they covered in section 6?

Mr Stewart: No, they are not; that is a different matter. A provision in the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 places a duty on the Department to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium education, the origins of which can be traced back to the Belfast Agreement. The similar provision for integrated education pre-dates it.

The Chairperson: It will take us some time to cover the next provision in schedule 1, and we must move on. However, I would like members to consider the connection between paragraphs 2, 7 and 8 of schedule 1.

It might be helpful to move to page 31, which is the start of schedule 1, and go through any issues of concern. There are no issues with paragraph 3, which deals with the tenure of office of the ESA. There is obviously an issue around remuneration and allowances for members. Everyone will be paying due regard to that, I hope. I hope that it will be well scrutinised and open to public inspection.

After remuneration, allowances and pensions of employees, we come to committees, and there is an issue concerning the link between the ESA board and the establishment of committees; to date, we have not had a clear indication about the shape of the committees. Members will know that this matter was referred to

in the letter that the Committee agreed to send to the Minister. The Minister's view is that local committees will comprise elected representatives and that the relationship with the local ESA unit will not be specified in legislation. Members will recall that the reference to an ESA footprint and other such aspects must be flexible to allow the ESA to develop and transform itself.

We shall leave our considerations for the time being, and committees will be our starting point when we return to the Bill. Thank you, Chris, and I thank members for their indulgence. Once again, I thank the staff for their invaluable contributions in preparing the paperwork to enable us to do our work.

Are members happy to work on, even though we do not have a quorum? No decisions will be made; we will just be hearing presentations.

Members indicated assent.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

10 June 2009

EDUCATION BILL (NIA 3/08)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Trevor Lunn (Acting Chairperson)
Miss Michelle McIlveen (Acting Chairperson)
Mrs Mary Bradley
Mr John O'Dowd
Mrs Michelle O'Neill

Witnesses:

Mr Jeff Brown
Mr Chris Stewart } Department of Education

The Acting Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): The Committee now moves to the scrutiny of clauses 1 and 2, schedule 1 and clauses 3 to 12. Members are thin on the ground this morning, and the spokesmen — and “spokesmen” is the correct word — from the Ulster Unionist Party, the DUP and the SDLP are absent. Are members content to continue with the clause-by-clause scrutiny, even though it may be deemed inappropriate to make decisions in the absence of those members?

Members indicated assent.

The Acting Chairperson: Several papers have yet to be forwarded to the Committee from the Department. Although Chris Stewart is not here in his capacity as a witness, are members happy for him to aid us in our deliberations?

Members indicated assent.

The Acting Chairperson: Chris, you are more than welcome.

Mr Chris Stewart (Department of Education): My colleague Jeff Brown is with me today.

The Acting Chairperson: Members will recall that at its meeting on 27 May 2009 the Committee began its detailed scrutiny of clause 1, which creates the education and skills authority (ESA); and schedule 1, which deals with the ESA's membership and committee arrangements, among other matters. The Committee

considered clause 1 and discussed in some detail schedule 1(2), which deals with the membership of the ESA. Members had no comments on schedule 1(3) to schedule 1(6). The Chairperson reminded members to consider their position on the make-up and role of local committees before the next meeting.

I propose that the Committee continue its scrutiny of the remaining paragraphs of schedule 1 as well as clauses 2 and 3 to clarify our position on them.

I remind members that, having heard many stakeholders' concerns and the Department's response to them, the objective of the session is to obtain clarity on members' views; in particular, whether they are content with the clauses or whether they would like them amended. Members may wish to express that as proposed changes in principle or suggested rewording or additional wording; they may request additional information or clarification as a matter of urgency from the Department or from stakeholders in response to their concerns.

Schedule 1(7)(1) states: “ESA may establish committees”

There is no requirement in paragraph 7 or elsewhere in the Bill, as far as I am aware, for the ESA to establish either local or any other kind of committees, although the Minister and officials said that it is the intention to create local committees. The Department of Education's response to the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) submission was that although the ESA's committees and local units will be a key part of the organisation, it was not the Department's intention to specify the detail of committee arrangements in the Bill. The Department is preparing a paper on local committees, which was to have been with the Committee three or four weeks after the Department's letter of 5 May. However, it has not yet arrived. Is there any further information on it?

Mr Stewart: We hope that the paper will be with the Committee next week.

The Acting Chairperson: The Committee does not know the content of the paper. However, if the Department's position continues to be that the committee arrangements should not appear in the Bill, are members content with such an approach? Would they wish the Bill to require the Department to create and fix the number of local committees or spell out their role and function and what regard the ESA and its local manager and delivery units should have to local committees? It depends on whether we want to go into such detail.

Another approach would be the inclusion of an enabling provision for the Department of Education to make regulation covering the composition, role and operation of local committees. The mechanism that the Department of Education proposes is similar to what it proposes for the education advisory forum. A

component for that could include a timing requirement, possibly linking the commencement of the Bill to the making of the regulations. Members may also wish to consider whether such a regulation should be subject to positive or negative approval by the Assembly. Have members views on that paragraph?

Mr Lunn: Four words seem scant preparation for committees and their duties. Is there a comparison with what happened with the Library Authority?

Mr Stewart: Such wording is by no means unusual in review of public administration legislation. It would be unusual to specify in primary legislation the subregional or local organisation of a regional body, although that is not the case with the Housing Executive or the Police Service. I understand that the Police Service legislation requires a subregional structure, but does not specify what that structure might be. For example, it is regarded as an operational matter for the Police Service to determine the configuration of the various divisions in the service. Likewise, the Housing Executive's local structure is based on regions, divisions and local offices, but that is not specified in legislation.

Mr Lunn: Should an enabling provision be inserted in the Bill to allow the Department to make regulations?

Mr Stewart: If such a degree of control were considered necessary, that would be a possible approach. However, the Department will always have the power to direct the ESA if it felt that the ESA was falling short or taking a fundamentally wrong approach on local structure. An enabling provision for regulations would simply be a more specific means of doing the same thing.

I take the Acting Chairperson's point about linking the regulations to the commencement arrangements overall. However, it would be necessary at least to commence the powers to make regulations so that those regulations were brought into operation when the ESA comes into existence. Making the commencement arrangements under such an approach could become complex and would have to be thought through carefully.

Mr Lunn: Are you happy with the provision as it is? I do not have a firm view on it.

Mr Stewart: The happiness, or otherwise, of departmental officials is not important. *[Laughter.]* It is the Minister's view at present that the provisions should remain as drafted.

Mr O'Dowd: Is there any legal impediment to changing schedule 1(7) from "ESA may establish committees" to "ESA will establish committees."?

Mr Stewart: No.

Mr O'Dowd: Without going into the details of what the committees will be, would that be possible?

Mr Stewart: Subject to legal advice, I do not see that being a problematic change.

Mr Lunn: Can I take it that the ESA cannot operate a nationwide system without local committees?

Mr Stewart: It would be extremely difficult for it to operate effectively without local committees. Without such committees there would not be the necessary local input from elected representatives and stakeholders to allow the organisation to be sufficiently in touch with what it needs to do.

Mr Lunn: I agree with John's suggestion that 1(1) should be changed from "ESA may establish committees" to "ESA will establish committees."

Mr O'Dowd: The Committee should check the legal advice on that change. Sometimes changing a small word in legislation can make a huge difference.

Mr Stewart: It can indeed. I suspect that the draftsman might prefer "ESA shall establish committees" rather than "ESA will establish committees". He will also advise the Department of any other changes that may be required to be made to the legislation.

Mr Lunn: Here we go again.

The Acting Chairperson: Will that information be included in the paper that the Committee will receive from the Department next week?

Mr Stewart: If the Committee wishes, the Department can suggest that to the Minister.

The Acting Chairperson: Are members content for that suggestion to go to the Minister?

Members indicated assent.

The Acting Chairperson: Schedule 1(7)(2) makes the membership of any committee of the ESA subject to the approval of the Department. Are members content with that approach? It is linked to our previous discussion on committees.

Mr Lunn: Am I reading schedule 1(7)(2) correctly? It states:

"A person who is not a member of ESA shall not... be appointed to a committee of ESA."

The Acting Chairperson: In full it states:

"A person who is not a member of ESA shall not, except with the approval of the Department, be appointed to a committee of ESA."

Mr Stewart: That is a fairly standard provision. It is intended to allow for the committees of the ESA not to be exclusively composed of full members of the ESA. Rather, the provision inserts a requirement, as Trevor correctly pointed out, for departmental approval if the ESA wishes to appoint someone who is not a full member of the ESA to a committee.

There will be what one might regard as wholly internal committees in the ESA. For example, every

non-departmental public body of this nature would have an audit and risk committee, but that is an internal matter, and the ESA will decide which of its full members will be members of that committee. It would not be required to seek departmental approval for such appointments.

Mr Lunn: Yes, but we are discussing local committees. Schedule 1(7)(2) —

The Acting Chairperson: It deals with committees that are much broader than the local committees.

Mr Lunn: It would make more sense to me if it did not say “not”.

Mr Stewart: That provision allows for the full range of the committees that the ESA may require, both those that one would expect at the headquarters of a regional organisation, as well as local committees.

Mr Lunn: Does:

“A person who is not a member of ESA”

mean that a member of those seven to 11 people at the top of the tree cannot be appointed to a sub-committee?

Mr Stewart: They can, but only with the approval of the Department.

Mr Lunn: OK. Do the words:

“except with the approval of the Department”.

Does that mean that the Department has to approve every member of the ESA’s sub-committees?

Mr Stewart: Yes. That is not an unusual approach. Since the Department will be giving the ESA £2 billion of taxpayers’ money, it has a strong interest in who that body appoints to look after those funds.

Mr Lunn: Why is that decision left with the Department rather than the ESA?

Mr Stewart: The ESA will decide whom to appoint to committees. However, the appointment of people who are not members of the ESA will be subject to departmental approval. That is not unusual, and, indeed, I am not aware of any organisation that does not have a similar requirement.

The Acting Chairperson: Are members content with schedule 1(7)(2)?

Members indicated assent.

The Acting Chairperson: Schedule 1(7)(3) provides that the ESA may pay to members of its committees who are neither members nor employees of ESA such remuneration and allowances as ESA may, with the approval of the Department, determine. Are members content with that provision?

Members indicated assent.

The Acting Chairperson: Schedule 1(8)(1) permits the ESA to delegate any of its functions to any committee or employee of the ESA; 1(8)(2) permits a committee

of the ESA to delegate any functions to any employee of the ESA; and 1(8)(3) makes such a delegation of functions subject to law and to any regulations that the Department may make under schedule 1(8)(4).

Such regulations would enable the Department to require prescribed functions of the ESA to be exercised on its behalf by a prescribed employee of the ESA, and it would allow the Department to regulate the ESA’s appointment of an employee for the purposes of exercising such functions.

Are members content with that approach or is further clarification required? Would members prefer the functions to be specified in schedule 1(8) or are they content to let the Department deal with them in regulations?

Mrs M Bradley: We should go with your suggestion.

Mr Stewart: Such detailed specification would be most unusual in either primary or subordinate legislation. Schedule 1(8) is a standard paragraph with a standard approach to the internal governance of a non-departmental public body. We do not envisage the power to make regulations being used very often, but I will give an example of a situation in which it might be used.

The ESA will have a director with responsibility for children’s services. I am not saying that we would, but, in certain circumstances, the Department might want to ensure that that member of staff took the lead role in child protection issues, perhaps in liaison with other public authorities. We might also wish to ensure that the holder of that post is suitably qualified and experienced in child-protection matters. If necessary, we could prescribe that in regulations under schedule 1(8)(4)(a) or schedule 1(8)(4)(b).

It would require a great deal of additional detail to try to specify precisely the role of a local committee in either primary or subordinate legislation. That would be a very unusual approach, and not one that I recommend.

The Acting Chairperson: Will you provide a breakdown of the nature of the regulations?

Mr Stewart: I imagine that the regulations will be very short; they would simply identify the posts for which we want to prescribe duties and the qualifications that the post holder should have.

The Acting Chairperson: Is there any information about the powers?

Mr Stewart: I am sorry; I do not quite follow the question.

The Acting Chairperson: Will you explain what you said in advance of that?

Mr Stewart: If we felt it necessary, the regulations could apportion functions and duties to the ESA’s senior

staff or specify that a post should be responsible for child protection, for example, rather than leave it all to the ESA.

If we wished to be particularly directive, we could specify all the posts and functions and all the qualifications that all post holders must have. I do not envisage the Department having to do that.

Mrs M Bradley: The Department again uses the word “may” rather than “can”. I do not believe that that shows that the Department is disposed towards taking action. The word “may” is not strong enough.

Mr Stewart: I will convey the Committee’s views to the Minister. It is not for me to encourage the Committee one way or another, other than to say that that would be a most unusual approach.

The Acting Chairperson: Will the regulations go through the Department or the Assembly?

Mr Stewart: I would have to check the Bill, but I imagine that the regulations will be subject to the normal Assembly control, almost certainly by negative resolution.

Mr O’Dowd: Mary questioned the use of the word “may”; however, schedule 1(8) allows the Department to decide whether it may or may not act in a particular way, whereas “shall” would be more prescriptive.

Am I correct in assuming that the authority to delegate powers to an employee exists in many agencies and Departments and in local councils, the officers of which can be delegated powers by their council?

Mr Stewart: Yes, absolutely; all review of public administration (RPA) legislation has similar provisions.

The Acting Chairperson: Are members content with schedule 1(8)?

Members indicated assent.

The Acting Chairperson: Schedule 1(9), 1(10), 1(11) and 1(12) provide for the ESA to make standing orders to regulate its procedures and committees. They deal with the validity of its proceedings, those of its committees in certain eventualities, the application of the ESA seal in the execution of documents and the service of documents on the ESA. Members will note from the information that was collated by the Committee Clerk that the Ulster Teachers’ Union was the only organisation to comment on those provisions. Do members have any views?

Mr Lunn: They appear standard; however, does section 19(1)(a)(v) of the Interpretation Act (Northern Ireland) 1954 restrict the ability of the ESA to make its own rules?

Mr Stewart: No. That is a standard and well-worn piece of legislation that sets the governance rules for every public body.

The Acting Chairperson: Are members content with schedule 1(9), 1(10), 1(11) and 1(12)?

Members indicated assent.

The Acting Chairperson: Schedule 1(14), 1(15) and 1(16) provide for the funding of the ESA by the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning. They prevent the ESA from borrowing money, require it to keep proper accounts and to provide those accounts to the abovementioned Departments and to the Comptroller and Auditor General. Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

The Acting Chairperson: Schedule 1(17) and 1(18) provide for the sending of an annual report to the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning, for the laying of it before the Assembly and for other such reports and returns that the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning may reasonably require. Are members content with those provisions?

Members indicated assent.

The Acting Chairperson: Schedule 1(19) would add the ESA to a list of organisations whose members are disqualified from serving as MLAs. Members will recall that the Committee sought legal advice on this, which it considered at its meeting on 27 May 2009. The legal advice was that without 1(19) there would be no legal impediment and that, in respect of a conflict of interests, an MLA could serve on the ESA provided that they declared their membership in the way that they declare membership of an education and library board.

Do members consider a declaration of interest sufficient, or would it be preferable to rule out the possibility of such conflicts, as paragraph 19 would? I know that some absent members have an opinion on the matter. Should we continue the discussion or should we wait until those members return?

Mr O’Dowd: I am happy to wait. I think that there is more to the legal advice than has been outlined today. I am happy to return to the issue, but members should study the legal advice.

The Acting Chairperson: Since the issue could cause problems, are members content to return to it at a later date?

Mr Stewart: For members’ benefit, the paragraph is a standard one. There is a similar requirement on all the new public bodies established by other Departments under the RPA. The Minister will, of course, consider any view expressed by the Committee, but if the Committee wishes to suggest a change, the Minister will no doubt wish to know why the Committee sees a need for MLAs to be members of the ESA when they

are disqualified from membership of similar public bodies established by other Departments.

The Acting Chairperson: Are members happy to return to the issue?

Members indicated assent.

The Acting Chairperson: Paragraphs 20 to 22 of schedule 1 make the ESA subject to the ombudsman and the Freedom of Information Act 2000, and set the financial year end as 31 March. Are members content with those provisions?

Members indicated assent.

The Acting Chairperson: We move on to clause 2. I refer members to the spreadsheet of stakeholder comments and concerns, the Department's responses, and the wording of the clause covering the functions and general duty of the ESA.

Members will recall concerns that the ESA's duty regarding youth services is referenced in clause 2(2) (b); 2(2)(a) covers the ESA's duty in respect of primary and secondary education and educational services. Members will recall that the Committee heard from officials that the reason for a separate subsection is that youth-services provision extends to the age of 25, which is beyond the age limit of 18 for children and young people to which the duty in clause 2(2) (a) refers. Do members have views on clause 2 or are they happy with the Department's approach? Officials explained that educational services encompass pre-school education, but several witnesses, primarily those from the Southern and Belfast boards, expressed doubt.

Mr Stewart: The definitions are extremely complex, and some overlap. Educational services include preschool provision other than that in schools, which would be part of the definition of primary education. By means of a combination of the various definitions, clause 2 provides complete coverage of all the various services and stages of education. However, it is not an easy read because of the complexity of the definitions involved.

The Acting Chairperson: Do members have any comments?

Mr Stewart: The Minister may wish to suggest an amendment to clause 2(2)(b). We have given the technical explanation of why youth services have to be mentioned separately, but we recognise, as was pointed out by various stakeholders, that the language in clause 2(2)(a) is different from that in clause 2(2)(b). Clause 2(2)(b) looks rather bald by comparison. The Department may seek to make the language in clause 2(2)(b) more similar to that in clause 2(2)(a) to make it clear that youth services are seen as an important and intrinsic part of the education system, and that, just like primary and secondary education, it is their purpose to contribute

to the spiritual, moral, cultural, social, intellectual and physical development of those who receive youth services.

The Acting Chairperson: Have Members anything further to add?

As there no further comments, I will move on. Members will note that in response to Comhairle na Gaelsoclaíochta (CnaG) concerns and suggestions, the Minister has agreed that the ESA should have a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium education. The Department is considering how that might be reflected in the legislation. The Committee was provided with a copy of a letter sent to Dominic Bradley and the proposed wording of the Minister's amendment. The Committee has not seen the detail of the amendment, and my party colleagues and I may have a view on it. Do members have any views on the clause and the Minister's proposal, or do we want to wait until we see the detail of it? Are members happy to wait for the detail?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Stewart: I suspect that the duty would look very similar in construction to the existing duty on the Department, which, if memory serves me correctly, is contained in article 89 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998.

The Acting Chairperson: Do you have an idea of when the Committee might be given a copy of that wording? There is obviously some urgency with this.

Mr Stewart: We hope that the Minister's reply to the Committee's letter of 20 May will include that wording and most, if not all, of the other information that the Committee seeks.

The Acting Chairperson: Clause 2(3) contemplates a situation whereby the ESA will temporarily be the owner of the schools currently vested in the education and library boards, pending the creation of a new statutory ownership body. Clause 22 and schedule 3 provide for the transfer of the property of the dissolved bodies, including education and library boards, to the ESA. Clause 2(3) specifically imposes a duty on the ESA that in exercising its duties it will:

"ensure that schools whose premises are not vested in ESA are treated on the same basis as schools whose premises are vested in ESA."

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) has flagged up its concerns regarding the fundamental contradiction inherent in the ESA having ownership of schools in one sector but not of schools in other sectors. My reading of that would be that CCMS sees that as positive discrimination, although I may take another view. I cannot speak on behalf of members who are not present, but a mechanism with which my party would be happier would need to be found in advance of the ESA being established. Do other

members have a view on the nature and membership of the ownership body?

Mr Lunn: CCMS has flagged up a concern, and that is fair enough, but clause 2(3) makes it abundantly clear that the ESA cannot discriminate in any way against schools whose premises are not vested in the ESA. It could not be simpler. For once, I agree with the thinking. I do not see what the problem is.

The Acting Chairperson: So you are happy with that paragraph as it stands?

Mr Lunn: Yes.

The Acting Chairperson: Other bodies have made a number of comments. Members are extremely quiet this morning. *[Laughter.]* I do not know whether that is good or bad. Do members wish to discuss any other aspects of clause 2 at this stage?

Just before we move on to clauses 3 to 12, which fall under the heading of

“ESA to be single employing authority for grant-aided schools”,

I must make my apologies as I have to leave. I will now hand over to Mr Lunn. As I am leaving and only four members will remain, the Committee will not have enough members present to make decisions.

(The Acting Chairperson [Mr Lunn] in the Chair).

The Acting Chairperson (Mr Lunn): Are members content that I take the Chair?

Members indicated assent.

Mr O'Dowd: We will see how you behave yourself.

The Acting Chairperson: Clauses 3 to 12 fall under the heading

“ESA to be single employing authority for grant-aided schools.”

Although we do not have enough members present to make decisions, we can still discuss the clauses.

Before moving to the wording of each clause, I propose that the Committee consider the general issues that some stakeholders raised about the ESA employing all staff in grant-aided schools. A record of the issue and the position reached with the Department is set out on pages 2 to 4 of the table that is attached to the Committee's letter to the Minister of 20 May 2009. I draw members' attention to some points included in the departmental submission that was discussed at the Committee's meeting on 1 April. I also draw members' attention to some of the comments that were made by departmental officials at that meeting, which are reproduced on pages 3 and 4 of the table.

The first bullet point of paragraph 3 of the Committee's letter to the Minister concludes that:

“the Committee had not expressed a formal view to the Minister on the suggestion”.

The suggestion is to amend the Bill to include a provision for the Department to make regulations on schemes of employment as set out in broad terms on 1 April. We can discuss the suggested amendment and regulation to give greater clarity and certainty about the detail of the arrangements and the content of employment schemes, but we cannot reach a view on them. Do members have any comments?

As members have no comments, I will move on. Members will recall that when the chief executives of the education and libraries board gave evidence to the Committee on 1 April 2009, Mr Cargo stated:

“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.”

That legal clarity has still not been provided.

Following that meeting, the Committee obtained legal advice on the employer/employing authority distinction, which highlighted that the Department, in relation to CCMS, had made regulations clarifying who the appropriate respondent was in the event of an employment dispute resulting in litigation and confirming the right of CCMS to be joined in any proceedings brought against the governors of a Catholic maintained school. Again, the Committee awaits a response from the Department on questions arising from that.

Clause 3(1) 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.”

Clauses 4 to 8 provide for a system of employment schemes. An employment scheme is to be prepared by the submitting authority of every grant-aided school and submitted to the ESA for approval. Members will recall that a number of stakeholders, including the Governing Bodies Association (GBA) and the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education (NICCE), raised serious concerns about those clauses and their consequences for the ethos of certain sectors and schools. Members will be able to recall that, so I will not read out the words that the representatives from NICCE used. Other stakeholders, such as C na G, the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), the North Eastern Education and Library Board, the Ulster Teachers' Union (UTU), the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) and other unions welcomed the concept of a single employer of all staff.

Do members have any thoughts on that, or will we keep moving?

Mr O'Dowd: I am happy enough.

The Acting Chairperson: Clause 3(2)(a) defines the submitting authority. For Catholic maintained schools, the submitting authority will be the trustees of a school, whereas in other grant-aided schools it will be the board of governors.

The views on the submitting authority are diverse. For example, on the one hand, the INTO said that all boards of governors — with no distinction for spurious ethos — should be submitting authorities. On the other hand, NICCE said that it welcomed the Bill's recognition that the owner and trustees will have a key role in determining the scheme of employment and scheme of management of each Catholic grant-aided school. It believes that that is essential if owners/trustees are to fulfil their duty to ensure that the ethos and defining character of a school are sufficiently recognised and present. Members will recall that the Minister is minded to propose an amendment to the definition of submitting authority to ensure that the owners or trustees would be the submitting authority for all schools. The Department's response to the unions is included in members' packs.

At our meeting on 22 April, after the session with the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC), departmental officials advised the Committee that:

“one particular function — the role of the submitting authority — presents us with a challenge in relation to the controlled sector.”

Chris Stewart said:

“We have outlined two options that might help overcome that. The first is to place the submitting authority role directly with the boards of governors, most of which will, of course, include TRC governors. The second is to place a requirement on the ownership body — if it has a submitting authority role — to consult and involve the representative body.”

The Committee is still awaiting a paper from the Department on the general issues that were raised by several stakeholders to achieve clarity and certainty on the employer/employing authority issue through draft amendments to the Bill to make regulations and the terms of the draft regulations on schemes of employment as set out on 1 April. Do you have any thoughts on that, Chris?

Mr Stewart: I will make a few points that could assist the Committee. The terms “employing authority” and “employer” have attracted a great deal of mystique. Members will notice that the term “employing authority” appears only once in the Bill, over the heading of the clauses. At times, perhaps too much is read into the phrase “employing authority”; it is simply the authority that employs. That is the Department's fault, because that is the phraseology that it used at the beginning of the RPA.

I now tend to refer to the ESA as the single employer, which is what it will be. The ESA will employ all staff in all grant-aided schools. Boards of governors will have a range of employment functions that they will discharge on behalf of, and in the name of, the ESA. Any action of a board of governors will be on behalf of, and in the name of, the ESA. We recognise the point made by stakeholders about the need for clarity and certainty about what exactly boards of governors will be allowed to do. The Minister is considering the suggestion that that ought to be set out in regulations rather than in guidance only. She will, I hope, respond to the Committee on that matter next week.

At the same time, we can consider the issue on which your legal advice touched; whether the ESA, as the employer, will have the right to be joined to any action that is taken against a board of governors. I do not imagine that it would be difficult to include a provision that will make that the case. However, I do not think that there is as much uncertainty or lack of clarity on the matter as some stakeholders have suggested. The arrangements and the model that we have proposed are very similar to the arrangements that currently apply in Catholic maintained schools. Essentially, the CCMS model will be applied to all schools. That model has worked successfully since CCMS was established, and we propose to extend the arrangements on that basis.

The Acting Chairperson: Do members wish to make any comments? I do not think that you will get any argument from the members who are currently present. We cannot do much about that presently; we will have to return to the issue.

Mr Stewart: We appreciate the depth of concern that stakeholders have expressed to the Committee. At times, they tend to overlook a particular aspect of the policy. Many have sought to interpret the provisions as an attempt on our part to introduce some kind of command-and-control arrangements for employment. Nothing is further from our minds.

The intention is that the schemes of employment will be based on model schemes and that the stakeholders will have a very significant input — in fact, they may go as far as to write the model schemes for the ESA. For example, we would strongly encourage the Catholic commission to let us have its views and, if possible, suggestions for a model scheme that would apply to Catholic schools. Likewise, the GBA, if it chooses to resume contact with us, may wish to contribute to a model scheme for grammar schools.

The Acting Chairperson: We will move on to look specifically at each clause. I will highlight some of the key issues and concerns around clauses 3 to 12 and schedule 1. Members may have other concerns, and I ask them to indicate whether they wish to raise them as

we proceed. I will refer to the spreadsheet and some of the information in the letter and table that the Committee issued to the Minister on 20 May.

Clause 3(1) deals with the underlying principle of that part of the Bill. Do members have any proposed amendments in the light of what has been said, or will we have to leave the matter until the Committee has more of a representation?

Mrs O'Neill: With respect, it may be safer to leave it. We can talk the issue through today, but we will have to come back to it if other members who are not present today have concerns to raise. That would mean that we would have to go over it again.

The Acting Chairperson: If we had a quorum for decisions, I might even agree with you. Unless Edwin Poots walks through the door, we are goosed. If members wish to propose amendments, we can take note of them for future reference. The officials are present if members would like anything to be clarified.

Mrs O'Neill: Is there any point in going over these clauses now, given that we will have to go over them all again when more members are present? Should we stop the scrutiny now and address other business?

The Acting Chairperson: Do other members have any comments?

Mrs O'Neill: We can talk about the Bill, but we cannot make any decisions or do anything. I know that we can get clarification from officials, but we will have to do it all again when more members are present.

The Committee Clerk: The decision is up to members.

Mrs M Bradley: We do not even know when the other two members will arrive.

The Acting Chairperson: We have received an apology from Nelson McCausland, and Edwin Poots indicated that he would be here at around 11.00 am. Basil McCrea and Tom Elliott were supposed to be here. We can stop the scrutiny at this point, if that is the wish of members.

The Committee Clerk: We could suspend the meeting for a period and see if other members will appear and recommence when we have a quorum to make decisions, if members are minded to take a short break.

The Acting Chairperson: It is not question of being quorate; it is a question of having a representation from each party, which we do not have at the moment and which I am not sure we will have.

The Committee Clerk: I suggest that we reconvene at 11.15 am, and I will make some phone calls to find out whether the UUP and DUP representatives will arrive at that time.

The Acting Chairperson: OK, members, will we suspend the meeting and reconvene in 10 minutes' time?

Members indicated assent.

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 22 May 2009

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Forum for Victims and Survivors

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when will the forum for victims and survivors be established. (AQW 7141/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr McGuinness): Under the relevant legislation the Commission for Victims and Survivors has a statutory duty to convene a Forum for Victims and Survivors.

The Commission is currently progressing its work on establishing the Forum.

The Commission is also currently finalising its 2009/2010 workplan which will set out timescales for each stage of this work. Once we have received, considered and approved this plan, the Commission will forward it to the OFMDFM Committee as soon as possible.

Funding for Grammar Schools

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether there has been discussions at the Executive about allowing the Minister of Education to proceed with her intention to unilaterally withdraw funding from Grammar Schools. (AQW 7606/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: It is not our practice to disclose details of Executive business. The content of Executive papers and all aspects of Executive business are confidential.

Departmental Land

Dr McDonnell asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if in light of the current economic crisis, and with rising fuel and food prices, it has any plans to release departmental land for the use of local communities to grow affordable food and make local food more sustainable. (AQW 7613/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Of the four sites owned by OFMDFM (referred to in AQ 7706/09), Magherafelt is currently in the process of being sold to the NEELB and Crumlin Road Gaol and Ebrington will be subject to development in line with their masterplans.

As the Member will be aware we recently announced our intention to establish a Development Corporation to take forward the development of the Maze/Long Kesh site.

Any proposals around the use of land on these sites would therefore need to be considered in the context of the overall development of the sites. We therefore have no plans to release Departmental land for this purpose.

Departmental Land

Dr McDonnell asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the most recent audit of departmental land was undertaken; and how much unused land the Department currently holds. (AQW 7706/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Department has an asset register which contains all lands and property owned. These include the four former security sites transferred to us free of charge for social and economic regeneration for the benefit of the whole community.

The former Ebrington Barracks site in Derry/Londonderry (26 acres) is the subject of a detailed masterplan currently under development by Ilex, the urban regeneration company jointly owned by OFMDFM and DSD. A masterplan has also been published for the Crumlin Road Gaol (13 acres). The North Eastern Education and Library Board are in the final stages of purchasing the former army base at Magherafelt (8 acres) for a schools campus.

The only currently unused land at present is the 347 acre site at Maze/Long Kesh. We recognise the potential of this regionally significant and strategically placed site and are committed to exploiting its potential to the full.

Northern Ireland Bureau

Mr Gardiner asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration it has given to extending and enhancing the operation of the NI Bureau in Washington DC. (AQO 2716/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Our Bureau in Washington plays an important role in representing the Executive's interests in the United States. Over the past few years it has arranged access for us to both President Bush and President Obama and to other senior figures such as Secretary Hillary Clinton and Mayor Bloomberg of New York.

Since 2007 we have extended and enhanced the role of the Bureau. We have ensured that the office has built a closer working relationship with Invest NI to maximise potential in line with the Executive's priority on economic development. Further closer co-operation is taking place on tourism issues.

In addition, early last year the Bureau strengthened its representation in the United States by the appointment of a member of staff working out of New York. The post-holder is responsible for all activities in the New York Consular District which includes Pennsylvania, New York State and New England.

The Bureau's role will be reviewed in line with the Executive's International Strategy which aims to present ourselves internationally with a reputation as a place to invest, trade, visit, study and exchange knowledge. Any proposals for change to the current role of these offices will require the support of the Executive. In the meantime the Bureau continues to look for opportunities to create mutually beneficial links with American organisations and to extend its outreach programme to other parts of the United States.

In addition, the Bureau, in partnership with the Department for Employment and Learning, is to appoint a part-time Tertiary Education and Workforce Development Officer in the US. The post-holder will be based in the Bureau's Offices in Washington and will significantly enhance the work currently being undertaken by DEL and the Bureau in the US.

Aid for Peace Approach

Mr Burns asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many of its programmes the 'Aid for Peace Approach' has been applied. (AQO 2717/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We refer the Member to the answer to AQO 2711/09. Our comments then are equally applicable to this question.

Ethnic Minorities

Ms Purvis asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the grounds on which the 27 groups receiving funding to support the integration of minority ethnic communities were selected; and to

outline what assessment has been made of the impact of funds spent on race relations, including results of any such assessment, over the last three years. (AQO 2718/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The 27 groups who currently receive funding under the Minority Ethnic Development Fund 2009/10 were selected using published, objective criteria, and chosen by an independent selection committee appointed by officials in OFMDFM.

Each application was assessed in accordance with the specific selection criteria set out in the published application guidance.

These criteria and the fund have been operating successfully for some years now. This year we have increased the amount of money available to the fund by 10% to over £1 million to meet the increasing demand. This is on top of a substantial increase last year following devolution.

The amount of money sought by applicants to this year's fund totalled over £2 million. Given the high standard of the applications and the fact that there was only £1 million available, this has inevitably resulted in some good quality applications being unsuccessful.

OFMDFM officials assess the impact of the funding allocations through regular progress reports compiled by the funded groups, which detail the work they have been undertaking. We also monitor against a set of good relations indicators.

An external assessment of OFMDFM's Minority Ethnic Fund in 2003 noted that the fund had been seen as an example of good funding practice.

Given the increase in the minority ethnic population and the consequent demand for funding, OFMDFM officials are currently embarking upon an evaluation of the impact of funds spent on race relations in recent years.

Sustainable Development Strategy

Mr Elliott asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when it will publish a Sustainable Development Strategy. (AQO 2719/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are continuing to review our draft Sustainable Development Strategy with the objective of producing a new high-level Strategy that will align more effectively with the Executive's Programme for Government.

We are hopeful that in the near future we will be able to circulate a draft of the new Strategy document to Departments and to the OFMDFM Committee for consideration before beginning a wider public consultation.

Economic Policy and Public Service Directorate

Mrs Hanna asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work of the Economic Policy and Public Service Directorate. (AQO 2720/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Economic Policy and Public Service Directorate was restructured during Direct Rule, with its Public Sector Reform and E-Government functions transferring to DFP. The Economic Policy Unit remains in OFMDFM. This Unit has a broad range of responsibilities. In conjunction with DFP, it consolidates the Executive's Programme for Government and Budget. It provides advice to Ministers on a range of economic issues, particularly those of a central or cross cutting nature. The Unit has the responsibility, across the NICS, for the development and strengthening of policy capacity and for the implementation of sustainable development. The Unit also has oversight and management of the Integrated Development Fund and the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland.

Conflict Transformation Initiative

Mr Hilditch asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an assessment of its role in the Conflict Transformation Initiative case. (AQO 2721/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The case to which the Member refers was the judicial review of a decision by the Minister for Social Development to withdraw funding from the Conflict Transformation Initiative.

The judgment of the Court was given on 30 April. The Court found that the Minister for Social Development had not acted in accordance with a decision of the Executive and, therefore, not in accordance with the provisions of the Ministerial Code, and contrary to section 28A(1) of the Northern Ireland Act.

Programme for Government

Miss McIlveen asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what arrangements are in place to monitor delivery against the Programme for Government. (AQO 2722/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Programme for Government is framed under five priority areas which set out a range of key goals and commitments for the Executive collectively to deliver. These are in turn supported by a detailed framework of 23 cross-cutting Public Service Agreements (PSAs) which confirm the key actions and targets departments will take forward over the next three years in support of the Executive's priorities.

The Executive is determined to deliver on those targets and key goals. In that context, departments have worked together to develop detailed Delivery Agreements for each PSA. These Delivery Agreements set out in more detail how departments intend to ensure delivery of the targets and actions set out in the Programme for Government and provide the basis upon which the Executive will monitor delivery of the Programme for Government.

Performance against PfG goals, commitments and targets will be monitored through departmental returns to OFMDFM/DFP, culminating in the production of consolidated Delivery Reports for the Executive's consideration, which will draw together progress on delivery against the PfG targets and goals.

Sustainable Development Strategy

Mr Cree asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister why a revised Sustainable Development Strategy has not been published to date. (AQO 2723/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are continuing to consider the content of the draft Sustainable Development Strategy. Following completion of this exercise, we will undertake a phase of consultation prior to publication of the final document.

Programme for Government

Mr Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it intends to meet with Ministerial colleagues individually to discuss their Programme for Government targets. (AQO 2724/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Programme for Government is framed under five priority areas which set out a range of key goals and commitments for the Executive collectively to deliver. These are in turn supported by a detailed framework of 23 cross-cutting Public Service Agreements (PSAs) which confirm the key actions and targets departments will take forward over the next three years in support of the Executive's priorities.

The Executive is determined to deliver on those targets and key goals. In that context, departments have worked together to develop detailed Delivery Agreements for each PSA. These Delivery Agreements set out in more detail how departments intend to ensure delivery of the targets and actions set out in the Programme for Government and provide the basis upon which the Executive will monitor delivery of the Programme for Government.

The Executive has established a robust and effective framework to drive delivery of our priorities. This provides for us to meet jointly with Ministerial colleagues as appropriate to discuss performance and will also enable the Executive to collectively review performance.

Anti-Poverty Strategy

Ms Lo asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on progress regarding the development of detailed action plans associated with the anti-poverty strategy. (AQO 2725/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: In agreeing, on 20th November 2008, to formally adopt the broad architecture and principles of Lifetime Opportunities as the basis of its strategy to tackle poverty and social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on social need, the Executive further agreed to the establishment of an Executive Sub-Committee on poverty and social inclusion.

The first meeting of this Executive Sub-Committee took place on Thursday 26th March and we chaired this jointly. At its first meeting, the Sub-Committee:

- considered its terms of reference;
- was informed as to the levels of poverty here and individuals, groups and areas at greatest risk; and
- considered and discussed initial proposals as to possible priority action areas.

Following those discussions we have now asked that officials liaise with colleagues in other departments and finalise a list of priority action areas for consideration and agreement at the Executive Sub-Committee's second meeting, which we intend to convene during May.

At this second meeting the Sub-Committee will also specifically consider proposals in respect of the monitoring and reporting frameworks that will be associated with the Lifetime Opportunities strategy.

Programme for Government

Mr Spratt asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of how the Executive is performing against the targets set out in the Programme for Government. (AQO 2726/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Programme for Government is framed under five priority areas which set out a range of key goals and commitments for the Executive collectively to deliver. These are in turn supported by a detailed framework of 23 cross-cutting Public Service Agreements (PSAs) which confirm the key actions and targets departments will take forward over the next three years in support of the Executive's priorities.

The Executive is determined to deliver on those targets and key goals. In that context, departments have worked together to develop detailed Delivery Agreements for each PSA. These Delivery Agreements set out in more detail how departments intend to ensure delivery of the targets and actions set out in the Programme for Government and provide the basis upon which the Executive will monitor delivery of the Programme for Government.

The Executive has established a robust and effective framework to drive delivery of our priorities. In line with this, we will be monitoring progress on delivery against PSA targets, goals and commitments. Work has now been initiated to prepare a formal delivery report which we aim to publish before the summer recess.

Efficiency Review Panel

Mr I McCrea asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the work of the Efficiency Review Panel. (AQO 2727/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: On 9 April 2009, we announced our intention to appoint an Efficiency Review Panel to examine efficiency and value for money of aspects of the Strand One institutions. We hope to put to the Assembly soon proposals for the establishment of the Panel and its remit. The first task of the Panel will be to examine the number and organisation of Departments in the light of the present financial pressures and the implications of the Review of Public Administration, and to ensure that the departmental structure is best organised to deliver public services in an efficient manner. The review will be on the basis of both fairness and efficiency, taking account of the requirement to protect the safeguards which ensure the Executive is representative of the community and can participate and work together successfully in the operation of the institutions. The report of the Panel is expected later this year.

Equality Legislation

Mr A Maskey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the introduction of an Equality Bill in Westminster, if it will introduce legislation in the Assembly that will meet our particular circumstances. (AQO 2728/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are aware of the introduction of an Equality Bill at Westminster but no decisions have been taken on the future direction of equality legislation here.

Economy

Mr Cobain asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, further to Junior Minister Donaldson's comments to the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants on 17 April 2009, to detail how public expenditure has been used to provide additional stimulus to local markets and businesses since the onset of the economic downturn. (AQO 2729/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We announced a package of measures to address the economic downturn in the Assembly on 15th December 2008 which included measures to address problems in five key areas: energy and fuel poverty; debt and unemployment; the rising cost of living for households; support for the housing and construction sectors; and support for business. We brought forward a Financial Assistance Bill to allow us to react quickly to emerging problems and difficulties and included within the package around £45m reallocated during the December monitoring round to respond to the downturn.

During the course of last year we met with a series of stakeholder groups to learn directly of the core problems and difficulties arising from the development of the economic downturn. To develop and build upon this dialogue we have established an economic taskforce under the title of the Cross Sector Advisory Forum. In addition, we have met with the four main banks in recent months where we discussed how they were responding to the credit crunch.

We are acutely aware that this is a difficult time for local people and businesses. The Executive is monitoring the economic crisis and we aim to do all that we can to protect local interests from the worst effects of this economic turmoil.

Poverty and Social Inclusion

Mrs Long asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on activity in relation to the poverty and social inclusion stakeholder forum. (AQO 2730/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: In agreeing, on 20th November 2008, to formally adopt the broad architecture and principles of Lifetime Opportunities as the basis of its strategy to tackle poverty and social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on social need, the Executive further agreed to the establishment of an Executive Sub-Committee on poverty and social inclusion.

The inaugural meeting of this Executive Sub-Committee took place on Thursday 26th March and it was agreed that the terms of reference and the membership of the Poverty and Social Inclusion Stakeholder forum be on the agenda for the next meeting in May, with the intention of re-establishing this forum very soon.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): My Department does not retain the statutory responsibility for promoting rural businesses. However under the new Rural Development Programme over £500m will be available to rural businesses from Axis 1, 2 and 3. Of this £40m will through the farm diversification and business support measures help create, develop and grow rural businesses.

Horse Passports

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the Department's responsibilities in relation to the enforcement of the requirements of production of a passport in the buying and selling of horses; and the distinction between the Departments responsibilities and those of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. (AQW 7457/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The current horse passport is a measure to protect the human food chain from contaminated horse meat. My Department meets its responsibilities to protect the food chain by enforcing the requirements at point of slaughter and import/export. When evidence of other passport offences is brought to my Department's attention, this is considered and investigated, as appropriate.

The PSNI are responsible for investigating possible welfare issues as defined in the Welfare of Animals Act (NI) 1972.

Senior Civil Servant Bonuses

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much was paid in bonuses to senior Civil Servants in her Department in (i) 2003/04; (ii) 2004/05; (iii) 2005/06; (iv) 2006/07; and (v) 2007/08. (AQW 7520/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

| Year | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 |
|-------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|----------|
| Total Amount Paid | £60,000 | £60,500 | £69,000 | £82,500 | £107,000 |

There is widespread public anger at the large bonuses being paid to public servants who are already in receipt of substantial incomes. As Minister, I share this concern and want a review to be undertaken on this matter.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many cases of tuberculosis have been confirmed in each month in the last three years, in the North Down constituency. (AQW 7543/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The number of confirmed cases of bovine tuberculosis by month.

| Year | Month | Cases |
|------|-------|-------|
| 2006 | 3 | 1 |
| 2006 | 5 | 1 |
| 2006 | 8 | 1 |
| 2006 | 9 | 1 |
| 2006 | 10 | 1 |
| 2006 | 11 | 2 |
| 2006 | 12 | 2 |
| 2007 | 1 | 3 |
| 2007 | 3 | 1 |
| 2007 | 4 | 1 |
| 2007 | 5 | 1 |
| 2007 | 9 | 1 |
| 2007 | 12 | 1 |

| Year | Month | Cases |
|------|-------|-------|
| 2008 | 1 | 1 |
| 2008 | 2 | 2 |
| 2008 | 3 | 2 |
| 2008 | 8 | 2 |
| 2008 | 11 | 1 |

This represents cases that have been detected in the Newtownards Division, either at an official Tuberculosis test or by lesions detected during meat inspection in abattoirs, and had the disease confirmed by culture of the causal organism in the AFBI Laboratory.

Months with no confirmed cases have been omitted from the table.

Comprehensive information on the incidence of both bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis can be found on the DARD website at <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/dard-statistics/animal-disease-statistics.htm>. This site gives information for herds and animals in the north of Ireland and in addition gives a break down by month and by Divisional Office region.

Departmental Land

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if in light of the current economic crisis, and with rising fuel and food prices, she has any plans to release departmental land for the use of local communities to grow affordable food and make local food more sustainable. (AQW 7615/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: All agricultural land currently at the disposal of my Department is fully utilised (for example, for research, education and technology transfer purposes). Relinquishing this land would lead either to the ending of this important work, or the need to rent alternative land, thus displacing existing agricultural activities carried out by farmers. Therefore, I have no plans to release Departmental lands. You may wish to note, however, that the Allotments Act (NI) 1932, as amended, gives local Councils the power to provide, at their discretion, allotments for use by residents in their areas.

This provides a ready means to respond to the specific demands of local communities.

Tree Planting and Hedgerow Replacement

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many applications have there been for grants for tree planting and hedgerow replacement, per constituency, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 7634/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The following table indicates the number of participants in agri-environment (AE) schemes who received payments, as part of their agreements, for tree planting and hedgerow restoration. Data regarding funding available through AE Schemes is not available by constituency, therefore I have provided it by county. AE Schemes include the Countryside Management Scheme (CMS) and the Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) Scheme.

Field Boundary Restoration (FBR) includes hedge planting, hedge coppicing and interplanting, and hedge laying. It is not possible to present separate statistics for hedge planting/hedge coppicing and interplanting.

Number of participants in agri-environment schemes who applied to undertake field boundary management works and tree planting

| | Antrim | Armagh | Down | Fermanagh | Derry/ Londonderry | Tyrone |
|------------------------------------|--------|--------|------|-----------|-----------------------|--------|
| AE Scheme Tree Planting | | | | | | |
| 2006 | 233 | 134 | 216 | 77 | 259 | 270 |

| | Antrim | Armagh | Down | Fermanagh | Derry/ Londonderry | Tyrone |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|
| 2007 | 12 | 2 | 17 | 15 | 13 | 9 |
| 2008 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| AE Scheme FBR | | | | | | |
| 2006 | 1552 | 799 | 911 | 583 | 1249 | 1659 |
| 2007 | 1299 | 696 | 767 | 445 | 1115 | 1362 |
| 2008 | 1153 | 618 | 677 | 366 | 1024 | 1214 |
| Enhancement hedge planting | | | | | | |
| 2006 | 30 | 56 | 62 | 33 | 46 | 177 |
| 2007 | 19 | 50 | 48 | 37 | 0 | 115 |
| 2008 | 8 | 19 | 24 | 19 | 11 | 64 |
| Annual Totals | Antrim | Armagh | Down | Fermanagh | Derry/ Londonderry | Tyrone |
| 2006 | 1815 | 989 | 1189 | 693 | 1554 | 2106 |
| 2007 | 1330 | 748 | 832 | 497 | 1128 | 1486 |
| 2008 | 1161 | 637 | 701 | 385 | 1035 | 1278 |
| Grand Total | 4306 | 2374 | 2722 | 1575 | 3717 | 4870 |

The following table details number of applicants broken down by constituency who applied for tree planting to the Woodland Grant Scheme/Farm Woodland Premium Scheme and the Short Rotation Coppice Scheme 2007. The figures relate to applications for which approval has been granted and planting has been carried out.

NUMBER OF APPLICANTS WHO APPLIED TO TREE PLANTING SCHEMES DELIVERED BY FOREST SERVICE

| Constituency | Year | No. of applications |
|------------------------|------|---------------------|
| East Antrim | 2006 | 3 |
| | 2007 | 1 |
| | 2008 | 0 |
| Total 4 | | |
| East Derry/Londonderry | 2006 | 9 |
| | 2007 | 4 |
| | 2008 | 21 |
| Total 34 | | |
| Foyle | 2006 | 4 |
| | 2007 | 8 |
| | 2008 | 3 |
| Total 15 | | |
| Lagan Valley | 2006 | 12 |
| | 2007 | 18 |
| | 2008 | 8 |
| Total 38 | | |
| Mid Ulster | 2006 | 27 |
| | 2007 | 16 |
| | 2008 | 11 |

| Constituency | Year | No. of applications |
|--------------------------|------|---------------------|
| Total 54 | | |
| Newry and Mourne | 2006 | 40 |
| | 2007 | 27 |
| | 2008 | 12 |
| Total 79 | | |
| North Antrim | 2006 | 19 |
| | 2007 | 11 |
| | 2008 | 3 |
| Total 33 | | |
| North Belfast | 2006 | 1 |
| | 2007 | 0 |
| | 2008 | 0 |
| Total 1 | | |
| North Down | 2006 | 1 |
| | 2007 | 1 |
| | 2008 | 0 |
| Total 2 | | |
| South Antrim | 2006 | 30 |
| | 2007 | 9 |
| | 2008 | 7 |
| Total 46 | | |
| South Down | 2006 | 32 |
| | 2007 | 10 |
| | 2008 | 4 |
| Total 46 | | |
| South Tyrone & Fermanagh | 2006 | 42 |
| | 2007 | 48 |
| | 2008 | 35 |
| Total 125 | | |
| Strangford | 2006 | 6 |
| | 2007 | 11 |
| | 2008 | 6 |
| Total 23 | | |
| Upper Bann | 2006 | 16 |
| | 2007 | 13 |
| | 2008 | 4 |
| Total 33 | | |
| West Tyrone | 2006 | 57 |
| | 2007 | 15 |
| | 2008 | 22 |
| Total 94 | | |

Tree Planting and Hedgerow Replacement

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what financial assistance and grants have been made available for tree planting and hedgerow replacement. (AQW 7636/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The following grants and financial assistance have been made available since 2000:

- (i) Funding for Field Boundary Restoration was available under the Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2000 – 2006 through options in the Countryside Management Scheme (CMS) and Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) Scheme. Under the current RDP 2007 – 2013, the new Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) offers similar funding. Field boundary restoration includes hedge planting, hedge coppicing, interplanting, and hedge laying.
- (ii) These schemes also include options which provide funding for tree planting on areas which are 0.2 hectares or less.
- (iii) Participants in the CMS and ESA Scheme have also received assistance for hedge planting under capital grant enhancement plan measures.
- (iv) The Woodland Grant Scheme/ Farm Woodland Premium Scheme offers a capital payment which contributes towards the cost of establishing new woodland on a minimum area of 0.2 hectares.
- (v) The Short Rotation Coppice Scheme 2007 aids the establishment and management of short rotation coppice willow for the purposes of producing woodchip to be used a renewable energy fuel.

Cull of Badgers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will consider a cull of badgers due to tuberculosis, similar to that initiated by the Welsh Assembly. (AQW 7693/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: In March, the Welsh Rural Affairs Minister announced the intention to carry out a badger cull, alongside additional cattle measures, within an Intensive Pilot Area in Wales.

Last December, I announced the new strategic approach for how we deal with TB in the North, including the issue of badgers. This is an agreed joint industry/Government approach, based on addressing three key strands together – real partnership between government and industry, controlling the spread of TB between cattle, and addressing the wildlife factor. To enable us to deal with TB comprehensively and conclusively we need to be able to deal effectively with all the risk factors.

In respect of badgers, the key question we are seeking to address is whether a badger intervention strategy would help to achieve a cost-effective reduction in TB incidence in cattle in the North.

I intend to pursue the actions and research needed to fill the key gaps in our scientific knowledge and build the evidence to inform what we do to deal effectively with the wildlife factor.

We are planning a number of actions which will help to generate the necessary evidence. These include a study of the prevalence and distribution of TB in badgers across the North, and a case control study in both TB infected and clear herds in a TB high incidence area. We are also developing plans for a badger removal trial. In addition, we will continue to explore how best we can contribute to the development of a vaccine for badgers. These actions will be subject to the agreement of the Environment Minister where necessary, and to bids for the additional funding that will be needed.

I will review the evidence these actions produce to inform my decision about what we do to reduce the transmission of TB between wildlife and cattle.

Our strategy recognises that eradicating TB is not just about tackling the wildlife aspect. Measures to deal with cattle to cattle transmission of TB will also continue to be an important element of the strategy as we move forward.

Departmental Land

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when the most recent audit of departmental land was undertaken; and how much unused land the Department currently holds. (AQW 7707/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The NI Audit Office carries out an audit each year on the Department's Interim Accounts as at 31 December and end of year Resource Accounts as at 31 March. As part of these audits, all land asset information is available for examination. The last audited accounts are those dated 31 March 2009.

The Department carries out verification exercises each September, December and March to confirm the accuracy of data that is held on the fixed asset register. This exercise requires business areas to review the list of assets, including land, and to provide assurance that the details are correct or of amendments to be made.

As part of these exercises business areas are also asked to provide details of assets declared as 'Surplus to Requirement'. The current information being used in preparation of 2008/09 Resource Accounts is that a total of 143.29 hectares of land has been declared as surplus.

Equine Council for Northern Ireland

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development the reasons why a financial award was made to the non-constituted body, the Equine Council for Northern Ireland; and (ii) the amount of the award. (AQW 7726/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department has not made any payments to the Equine Council for NI (ECNI).

Rural Development Programme

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail when the funding in Axis three of the Rural Development Programme will be open for applications and what local councils are doing to ensure that farmers and rural dwellers are aware of how and when to apply. (AQO 2739/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am pleased to report that four areas SWARD, GROW, LAGAN and the North East have now opened for full applications and indeed 639 applications have been submitted to the Axis 3 measures. All areas have been receiving expressions of interest and to date over 1,000 have been lodged with the administration units. The full applications are being processed and eligibility checks and site visits are under way. The first assessment panels are due to be held in June. There has been a significant publicity campaign lead by my Department and supplemented by Joint Council Committee public events to publicise the programme with numerous events across the North.

The full contract for delivery is currently being examined by Joint Council Committee legal representatives, officials are still aiming to have contracts signed in June. Detailed implementation plans have been received from all seven Joint Council Committees and Local Action Groups. Officials have now carried out a detailed review of these and are liaising with lead administration units to work towards these being signed off. A full set of operating rules has now been made public these have undergone a significant review by officials to make them as user friendly as possible. My officials have established strong links to other government Departments and Agencies to ensure that all programmes maximise the assistance available to applicants on the ground and to ensure complementarity between programmes.

Bank Payments

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development in relation to the significant changes in the lending and overdraft policies of the Banks, if she will consider a return to the era when farmers had the option of using the BACS system or receiving their cheques directly. (AQO 2741/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Unfortunately it is no longer possible to give farmers the option of how they receive their EC subsidy payments. From 16 October 2008 EU regulations made it mandatory for all paying agencies to issue EC subsidy payments by BACS. For those farm businesses who do not have a UK bank account I have made arrangements for their subsidy payments to be made to a credit union of their choice provided it operates a UK bank account.

Rural White Paper

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made with the Rural White Paper and how the improved rural proofing process and rural champion concepts are being developed in the interim. (AQO 2742/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department has developed proposals for a thematic approach to the development of the Rural White Paper and has established five stakeholder sub-groups to take forward the work. The five themes – Rural Vision, Rural Governance, Rural Services, Rural Places and Rural People – have been developed on the basis of the main issues identified by rural stakeholders and has been discussed with other Departments and my Assembly Committee.

Following several preparatory meetings the sub-groups are now beginning their work reporting back to the Department in the Autumn. It is proposed that other Departments with responsibility for issues affecting rural areas will begin formally engaging with stakeholders as part of sub-group work. On completion the stakeholder reports will be formally considered by DARD together with the other Departments. The Department is also looking at issues relating to the evidence and research required to underpin and inform the Rural White Paper.

The public consultation on the Rural Champion concept and enhanced rural proofing has reinforced the collaborative approach suggested. My officials are currently finalising proposals to deliver both an enhanced rural proofing process and a rural champion framework which will allow for better integration across government and with rural stakeholders. When I have agreed a final proposal which meets the best interests of rural communities I will bring my proposals to the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee – in the coming weeks - and then to the Executive.

Less Favoured Areas

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will consider extending the consultation period on the possible changes to the Less Favoured Areas. (AQO 2743/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have received no representations from stakeholders to extend the consultation period. If an approach is made, an extension will be considered.

Dioxin Contamination

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she could confirm that the investigation by the PSNI into the feedstuffs contaminated by Dioxins issue remains ongoing, and to update the Assembly, as far as possible, on the latest feed-back that she has had from the investigating team. (AQO 2744/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Following initial involvement by the PSNI the case has been passed to the Environmental Crime Unit of the NIEA, the competent authority in NI, to lead on. No further detail can be given at this time as the investigation is still ongoing.

Farm Modernisation Programme

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has identified any legal risks that will, or may arise, as a result of her decision to deal with applications to the Farm Modernisation Programme on a first come first served basis. (AQO 2745/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Following the intervention of the European Commission on 17 February, my Department sought advice from the Departmental Solicitor's Office on the scheme's compliance with EU rules. This advice confirms that my Department has acted reasonably in its implementation of the EU rules. Correspondence from the European Commission also confirms that it is not for them to approve selection criteria for the scheme.

Taxation: Conacre System

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has met with senior Treasury officials to discuss the future tax implications for land owners who rent their agricultural lands by the conacre method of agreement. (AQO 2746/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The issue of taxation is not devolved to the Assembly as it is an Excepted Matter for determination by the British Treasury. It is therefore for the Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr. Nigel Dodds) to make representations to the British Treasury.

Nevertheless the implications of the recent judgement of the Court of Appeal cause me considerable concern especially in relation to land let in conacre by landowners which may have development potential. Therefore I have written to the Minister of Financial and Personnel outlining my concerns and asking that he pursue the matter with Treasury.

I would refer you to the fact that the Minister of Finance and Personnel had already written to and recently met with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Ms. Yvette Copper) about this matter and that a further meeting is planned.

Dioxin Contamination

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has ceased her attempts to attain compensation from the Republic of Ireland authorities in respect of the recent Dioxin contamination, which affected a number of farms and farmers in Northern Ireland. (AQO 2749/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I together with the First and deputy First Ministers and the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment sought access for North's farmers and processors to the South's financial assistance arrangements.

On 28 January 2009, DAFF Minister Brendan Smith, confirmed that due to legal and financial constraints, the South could not provide financial assistance to producers and processors here. Once this was established we moved quickly to secure the Executive's agreement for necessary budget allocation and to submit an application for an Exceptional Support Measure, through DEFRA, to the EU Commission.

This does not preclude legal action by individuals affected by this incident.

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Brolly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) what progress has been made with the Countryside Management Scheme; and (ii) have there been any improvements in delivery. (AQO 2750/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Applications from the first tranche (in 2008) of the new Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) were prioritised on the basis of land designations and 1,300 received farm visits. Around 1,000 of these have entered the Scheme.

There was an innovative approach in administering Scheme applications in 2008 using a computerised process which allowed a paperless application. The on-going development of this process will lead to continued improvements for future applications. Another measure to reduce bureaucracy and improve customer service has been taken. Farmers who applied in 2008, but did not progress to the farm visit stage, will have their application automatically resubmitted. This means they will not need to re-apply during the next application period.

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Regional and Minority Languages

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure at what stage is Northern Ireland's input into the UK's 3rd Periodical Report on Regional and Minority Languages. (AQO 2755/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): The Northern Ireland input to the UK's 3rd Periodical Report on Regional or Minority Languages had not yet been agreed. It is still being considered by the Deputy First Minister and the input cannot proceed to an Executive Meeting until agreement is in place.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office plan to issue the UK report in the coming weeks including the Northern Ireland Office input in relation to Irish and Ulster Scots but without the Northern Ireland Executive input.

I will continue to seek to progress this with a view to securing agreement as soon as possible.

Public Record Office

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the new site for the Public Record Office. (AQO 2758/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The construction phase of the new Public Record Office for Northern Ireland, which will be located in the Titanic Quarter, Belfast, commenced on 24 November 2008.

The construction programme is on schedule for completion in Autumn 2010 and it is estimated that the building, which will provide state of the art, larger and better facilities for accessing PRONI's records, will open to the public early in 2011.

North West 200

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to increase his Department's 3 year investment of £175,000 in the North West 200 event. (AQO 2759/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am pleased to advise that the organisers of the North West 200 have made a successful application for a further funding of £45,000 in 2009/10 to the Events Growth Fund to support the introduction of two campaigns which were be "rolled out" during race week. The "Stay a While" campaign received £30,000 whilst the "We Want You" campaign received £15,000.

"Stay a While" will entice visitors to extend their visit to Northern Ireland. It highlights some of the world class tourist attractions and facilities we have to offer and will ensure that the economic impact of this international event is spread throughout Northern Ireland.

The "We Want You" at the North West 200 is focused on the recruitment of volunteers. It highlights the wide range of opportunities involvement in the event offers and will be key in ensuring the events continued success. This campaign will also enable Northern Ireland to develop a pool of experienced volunteers, qualified in all aspects of event management and this will support efforts to attract other major events to Northern Ireland.

Organisers of the North West 200 have submitted a business case to Sport Northern Ireland for funding towards resurfacing work at the Paddock area of the course. Up to £100,000 funding has been approved and work was completed on 8 May.

This represents a significant level of funding to the North West 200 from my Department of over £300,000 in recognition of the importance that this event brings to Northern Ireland annually and to road racing world wide.

Tourism: Inland Fisheries

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions he has had with the relevant bodies on the promotion of inland fisheries as a tourist attraction. (AQO 2760/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department promotes inland fisheries as a tourist attraction through the DCAL angling website www.dcal-fishingni.gov.uk and various other activities such as attending overseas angling shows and publishing guides which highlight what Northern Ireland's inland fisheries have to offer to local and visiting tourists.

DCAL works with Tourism Ireland to promote angling in Northern Ireland internationally and have arranged to attend a number of angling shows with Tourism Ireland's support in the next twelve months.

Public Appointments

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the importance of a wide geographical spread of appointments to publicly funded bodies. (AQO 2761/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The principles of equal opportunity and diversity underpin Ministerial appointments to publicly funded bodies. Accordingly my Department conducts all public appointment processes in line with guidance as set out by the Commissioner for public appointments. This guidance offers Departments direction in ensuring a quality outcome to appointment competitions, and furthermore a process which commands public confidence.

The overarching principle of the public appointment process is that selection is based on merit. I am committed to achieving a greater geographical spread amongst public appointees provided that all action is consistent with the merit principle

Shared Future: Sport

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his plans for the integration of people through sport, in light of the decision not to go ahead with sports stadium at the Maze, in terms of providing a Shared Future; and how he proposes to ensure a high level of co-operation and co-ordination between the three sporting codes. (AQO 2762/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in partnership with Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) has recently developed a new 10-year Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation for Northern Ireland. This Strategy recognises that sport can make a significant contribution to local communities and promoting good relations. It proposes that Government should commit to promoting community cohesion through sport and contains a number of targets and actions to help achieve this. These include targets and actions to encourage under-represented groups to participate in sport and the provision of shared spaces for sport that promote community integration.

I am also currently discussing regional stadia requirements for football, rugby and Gaelic games with the respective Governing Bodies. The Governing Bodies already have well-developed strategies and mechanisms to bring reconciliation and community cohesion benefits to their individual sports and I will be encouraging them to avail of any opportunities which may present themselves to further promote the concept of a 'shared future'.

Ulster-Scots Culture and Heritage

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what his Department and its arm's-length bodies are doing to support the development of the Ulster-Scots culture and heritage within the community. (AQO 2763/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department and its arm's-length bodies are involved in a number of projects relating to the development of Ulster-Scots culture and heritage in the community.

DCAL provides funding to the work of the Ulster-Scots Agency whose Development Officers are working with Ulster-Scots communities to enhance, develop and maintain Ulster-Scots culture and heritage. The Agency received £2.5m from my Department in 2008. The Ulster-Scots Agency has recently reviewed its Financial Assistance Scheme and included in the revision is a proposal to fund community support officers.

DCAL funding for arts is disbursed by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Screen Commission. The Arts Council has funded, and continues to fund, a range of programmes which support the development of Ulster-Scots culture and heritage within the community. It has provided a total of £1.458m in funding to Ulster-Scots related projects since 2005, and has in place a Language Arts Policy through which it aims to support the sector and encourage growth.

National Museums has a statutory role to promote the awareness, appreciation and understanding by the public of art, history and science, the culture and way of life of people, and the migration and settlement of people with particular regard to Northern Ireland.

Indigenous Languages

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the development of a strategy for indigenous languages. (AQO 2765/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am considering a number of issues surrounding the protection, enhancement and development of Ulster Scots and Irish and I intend to present an initial paper to the Executive Committee on this matter in the near future.

Obesity

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the efforts of Sport NI in helping to tackle obesity. (AQO 2766/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) has lead responsibility for tackling obesity in Northern Ireland. Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport and physical recreation in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. Over the past few years DCAL, in partnership with SNI, has been developing a new 10-year Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation for Northern Ireland. Work on the Strategy has uncovered evidence that regular and sustained participation in sport, as a form of physical activity, can make a significant contribution to reducing incidences of obesity. On this basis, SNI agreed to join DHSSPS's Obesity Prevention Steering Group which was set up in 2008 to provide advice and strategic direction on all relevant issues relating to obesity. SNI also chairs the Obesity Prevention Steering Group's Promoting Physical Activity Advisory Group. Both these groups are working towards the development of an Obesity Prevention Strategic Framework which is due to be published in the summer of 2010.

In addition, SNI has developed a number of sports programmes the purpose of which is to encourage increased participation in sport and physical activity across the population. These include Active8, Places For Sport: Surfaces and a proposed Active Communities programme.

Elite Facilities

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail how much money is expected to be spent on Elite Facilities, in this financial year. (AQO 2767/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport NI has indicated a current profiled spend on Elite Facilities of €3.8m in this financial year. This is included in the current total profiled spend on Elite Facilities for the remainder of the present CSR period of €13.2m.

Irish Language

Mr Brolly asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on his Department's strategy to promote and enhance the Irish Language. (AQO 2768/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am considering a number of issues surrounding the protection, enhancement and development of Ulster Scots and Irish and I intend to present an initial paper to the Executive Committee on this matter in the near future.

Sports Grounds

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the process and timeline for dealing with the strategic requirements of the GAA, IRFU and IFA to develop stadia. (AQO 2769/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As you will be aware I asked the three governing bodies of the Sports involved to bring forward preferred alternatives on stadium provision. All three have now responded with their options and a process for examining these has been determined, the key stages of which are:

- Development of a Strategic Outline Case (SOC) which will identify the options to be tested in a full economic appraisal.

- SOC signed off by DFP.
- Full economic appraisal which will review the short-listed options in terms of their value for money, operational viability, sustainability and affordability. These will be carried out to the recommended 'Green Book' standards and are likely to include variants of the preferred options put forward by the Governing Bodies. As part of the process an Oversight Group representing DCAL, SNI and the SIB will be established with a remit to include:
 - Agreeing Terms of Reference for the consultants
 - Provision of advice to Sport NI and their consultants
 - Quality assuring the reports etc
 - Finalising and agreeing business cases
 - Bringing forward recommendations on stadia provision

I would expect this work to be completed by the Autumn, including consideration of economic appraisals by DFP. The proposals will be subject to the normal statutory processes, including planning and ultimately Executive consideration of the budgetary implications will be required.

Ulster Orchestra

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of funding for the Ulster Orchestra. (AQO 2770/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure does not fund the Ulster Orchestra directly as DCAL funding for the arts is disbursed by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

The Ulster Orchestra plays a very significant role in the cultural life of Northern Ireland. It is the only professional concert orchestra in Northern Ireland and its educational and outreach activities are at the very core of music provision in the region.

The Ulster Orchestra also provides a stable source of income for its 63 musicians and a platform to develop their professional skills.

I understand that a 2005 study produced by Millward Brown Ulster, in conjunction with Amethyst Business Solutions, concluded that the provision of public subsidy to the Ulster Orchestra is both socially and economically effective. The study found that the Orchestra has a positive impact on the NI economy by generating income for local businesses and direct spend. The study also highlighted that the Northern Ireland public is supportive of the principle of the Ulster Orchestra's existence and its activities.

I am aware that the Ulster Orchestra has indicated that it will face a more difficult funding environment in 2009/10 as a result of the economic downturn. I understand that this is largely due to an anticipated reduction in the amounts of private sponsorship and donations.

The Orchestra's funders include the Arts Council, BBC NI and Belfast City Council. Income is also derived from box office receipts, regional concerts, sponsorship, donations, lottery grants, programme sales and advertising.

I am pleased to confirm that the Arts Council, as the main funder, has provided substantial support to the Ulster Orchestra. The Arts Council awarded over £2m to the Orchestra in 2009/10, more than 50% of its income.

The Arts Council's ongoing support of the Ulster Orchestra will enable the Orchestra to continue to provide a highly valued service to the people of Northern Ireland and beyond.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Teacher Retirement

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education in relation to the Consultation on draft Teachers' (Compensation for Redundancy and Premature Retirement) Regulations (NI) 2009 and complementing amendments to the Teachers' Superannuation Regulations (NI) 1998;

- (i) when the Section 75 screening process was commenced;
- (ii) the method of consultation and where it was advertised;
- (iii) how many organisations were contacted as part of the statutory screening process and how many responses were received and where these responses can be viewed;
- (iv) if the recognised teachers unions and other stakeholders were offered an opportunity to be part of the consultation;
- (v) who took the decision to screen out the policy, the date the decision was taken and the basis for it;
- (vi) if the Minister was informed of the initiation of the Section 75 consultation and the outcome;
- (vii) if the Minister approved the screening decision and if so, when; and
- (viii) whether the Department deviated from its own equality scheme. (AQW 7455/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): (i) Cuireadh tús leis an phróiseas scagtha Ailt 75 ar 28 Eanáir 2009. Rinneadh próiseas scagtha sa bhliain 2008 fosta i ndáil leis an chinneadh lena chinntiú go raibh fostóirí indlíte na costais pinsin a bhain le bronnadh creidiúna seirbhíse breise (“blianta breise”) a íoc.

- (i) The Section 75 screening process was commenced on 28 January 2009. A screening process was also undertaken in 2008 in relation to the decision to make employers liable for the pension costs associated with the award of additional service credit (“added years”).
- (ii) Consultees were notified of the consultation by e-mail or by post. The consultation documents, including the screening template, were placed on the Department’s website prior to the start of the consultation, which was advertised in the Belfast Telegraph, the Irish News, the Newsletter and Foinse.
- (iii) Details of the consultation were sent to approximately 1,565 organisations/individuals. As at 11 May 2009, there were 35 responses, including two making no comment. At the end of the consultation period, i.e. 15 May 2009, all responses will be analysed and a summary of the responses will be published on the Department’s website as soon as is practicable.
- (iv) The Teachers’ Superannuation Consultative Committee is the established forum for consultation with the teacher unions on matters relating to the Teachers’ Pensions Scheme. Members of the Committee were first made aware in February 2006 that action was required to control the escalating costs of the Premature Retirement Compensation Scheme (PRCS); and PRCS has been included on the agenda and discussed at all meetings of the Committee held since June 2006. In addition, a PRCS Working Group was established as a sub-group of the Committee and has met on five occasions since February 2008.
- (v) The decision to screen out the policy was taken on 28 January 2009 by the Head of Teacher Negotiating & Pensions Policy Branch and agreed by the Equality Guidance and Co-ordination Unit. In over a year of consultation to date the Department has received no evidence of an adverse differential impact on Section 75 groups from any of the key stakeholders, nor any alternative that would promote good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group. In April 2008 a screening process was undertaken in relation to the decision to make employers liable for the pension costs associated with the award of additional service credit (“added years”). The Screening Template was placed on the Department’s website and comments invited from stakeholders, including representatives of Section 75 groups. None was received.
- (vi) I have been fully informed of the policy development process and the Equality Screening for the draft Regulations. The responses to consultation are currently being analysed and the outcome will not be known until the analysis is completed. I will decide if a full Equality Impact Assessment is required on the basis of evidence provided by consultees of any material adverse impact on Section 75 groups.
- (vii) I agreed on 12 March 2009 that the policy and screening should be published for consultation.
- (viii) The Department has not deviated from its own Equality Scheme. The Department’s Equality Scheme gives a commitment that policies will be subject to consideration of a number of criteria. These criteria were addressed in the equality screening of the policy and both the policy and the screening were subject to public consultation which closed on 15 May 2009.

Senior Civil Servant Bonuses

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education how much was paid in bonuses to senior Civil Servants in her Department in (i) 2003/04; (ii) 2004/05; (iii) 2005/06; (iv) 2006/07; and (v) 2007/08. (AQW 7518/09)

The Minister of Education: Sonraítear thíos méideanna na mbónas feidhmíochta a íocadh le státseirbhísigh shinsearacha:

Performance bonuses paid to senior civil servants are detailed below:

| | |
|---------|----------|
| 2003/04 | £40,000 |
| 2004/05 | £52,000 |
| 2005/06 | £77,500 |
| 2006/07 | £94,000 |
| 2007/08 | £106,000 |

There is widespread public anger at the large bonuses being paid to public servants who are already in receipt of substantial incomes. As Minister I share this concern and want a review to be undertaken on the matter.

Nursery Schools

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education how many children were refused admission to a nursery school or nursery unit in the North Eastern Education and Library Board for September 2009. (AQW 7556/09)

The Minister of Education: The North Eastern Education and Library Board have advised the Department that 501 children seeking a place in a nursery school or nursery unit in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area for September 2009 were unplaced when the admission processes ended on 1 May 2009. 102 of these children are in their final preschool year.

Thug Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt le fios don Roinn nuair a cuireadh na próisis iontrála i gcrích ar 1 Bealtaine 2009 nach raibh áit faighte ag 501 páiste a bhí ar lorg áit naíscoile nó áit in aonad naíscoile i limistéar Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt do mhí Mheán Fómhair. Tá 109 páiste as an líon sin sa bhliain réamhscoile dheireanach.

Classroom Assistants

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Education to provide figures for the cost, for each of the last three financial years, of classroom assistants employed to support children and young people in receipt of statements of educational need, broken down by (i) school; (ii) sector; and (iii) type, in the Belfast Education and Library Board area. (AQW 7581/09)

The Minister of Education: The first principle of the Data Protection Act 1998 prohibits the disclosure of personal information relating to an individual. As an analysis of these costs, if provided in the format requested, could possibly identify an individual's salary the costs involved can only be provided by sector.

Dá réir sin, tá curtha in iúl ag Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne Bhéal Feirste gur mar seo a leanas atá costas na gcúntóirí ranga atá fostaithe le tacaíocht a thabhairt do pháistí agus do dhaoine óga a bhfuil ráitis ar riachtanas oideachais acu, do gach bliain le trí bliana airgeadais anuas:-

Accordingly the Chief Executive of the Belfast Education and Library Board has advised that the cost, for each of the last three financial years, of classroom assistants employed to support children and young people in receipt of statements of educational need is as follows:-

| | Spend | | |
|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Type | Yr 1 2006-2007 | Yr 2 2007-2008 | Yr 3 2008-2009 |
| Maintained Nursery | £89,562 | £93,659 | £58,934 |

| | Spend | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Type | Yr 1 2006-2007 | Yr 2 2007-2008 | Yr 3 2008-2009 |
| Controlled Nursery | £102,887 | £147,381 | £51,043 |
| Maintained Primary | £1,430,714 | £1,865,016 | £2,359,255 |
| Controlled Primary | £1,007,424 | £1,472,048 | £1,768,657 |
| Maintained Post Primary | £654,247 | £871,088 | £1,125,026 |
| Controlled Post Primary | £189,099 | £312,456 | £439,540 |
| Controlled Grammar | £751,159 | £124,057 | £155,980 |
| Special | £4,146,284 | £4,571,424 | £7,444,687 |

Specialised Teaching

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Education to provide figures for the cost, for each of the last three financial years, of specialised teaching to support children and young people in receipt of statements of educational need, broken down by (i) school; (ii) sector; and (iii) type, in the Belfast Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 7582/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá curtha in iúl ag Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne Bhéal Feirste nach féidir na costais seo a mhiondealú de réir scoileanna aonair, as siocair go soláthraíonn an Bord tacaíocht shainmhúinteoireachta thar réimse na seirbhísí atá sonraithe sa tábla thíos.

The Chief Executive of the Belfast Education and Library Board has advised that as the Board provides specialist teaching support over the range of services identified in the table below it is not possible, therefore, to break these costs down by individual school.

The table below provides the specialist teaching by service to support children and young people in receipt of statements of educational need and the school sectors which are supported. Specialist teaching refers to any additional teaching support over and above that which may already be provided by the teacher in situ.

| | Sectors supported | | | | | Spend | | |
|--|-------------------|---------|-----------|---------|---------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Area of Need | Nursery | Primary | Post Prim | Grammar | Special | Yr 1 2006-2007 | Yr 2 2007-2008 | Yr 3 2008-2009 |
| Learning Support with Pupils with MLD | Yes | Yes | Yes | | | £1,473,274 | £1,503,358 | £1,600,442 |
| SPLD | | Yes | | | | £985,468 | £1,028,475 | £1,037,051 |
| Peripatetic | | Yes | Yes | Yes | | | | |
| Hearing / Visual | | Yes | Yes | Yes | | | | |
| SEBD outreach only - Clarawood / Harberton | Yes | Yes | | | | £395,485 | £405,626 | £463,766 |
| SPSS | | | Yes | | | £540,554 | £642,242 | £739,509 |
| ASD | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | £187,129 | £221,927 | £219,898 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | £3,581,910 | £3,801,628 | £4,060,666 |

MLD – Moderate Learning Difficulties

SPLD – Specific Learning Difficulties

SEBD – Social and Emotional Behavioural Difficulties

SPSS – Secondary Pupil Support Service

ASD – Autistic Spectrum Disorder

School Attendance

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education to detail her policy in relation to parents and guardians ensuring that children attend school; and what action can be taken against those who fail to comply.

(AQW 7625/09)

The Minister of Education: There are various options open to an Education and Library Board (ELB) when a parent fails to ensure their child's regular attendance. Firstly, the ELB serves a notice on the parent or guardian which requires them, within 14 days, to satisfy the ELB that the child is, by regular attendance at school or otherwise, receiving efficient full-time education suitable to their age, ability and aptitude and to any special educational needs they may have.

If the parent or guardian fails to satisfy the ELB within 14 days, the ELB may serve a School Attendance Order on the parent or guardian which requires them to register their child at a school named in the Order. If the parent or guardian fails to comply with a School Attendance Order, he/she is guilty of an offence and the ELB can institute proceedings.

The ELB can apply to the courts to issue fines to parents of children who are not attending school regularly. In the Magistrates Court the maximum fine that can be imposed is £1000 in respect of each child who is missing school.

The ELB can also apply to the Family Proceedings Courts to make an Education Supervision Order under Article 55 of the Children Order 1995. A court will make an Education Supervision Order when a child of compulsory school age is not being properly educated. The Order places a child under the supervision of the ELB.

An application for an Education Supervision Order may be refused if there are other concerns about the child's welfare. In these circumstances the Court may direct Social Services to investigate a child's circumstances under Article 56 of the Children's Order.

The ELBs' Education Welfare Service (EWS) also receives referrals from schools when pupils' school attendance is a cause for concern or drops below 85%. The initial response to a referral is a home visit which provides the Education Welfare Officer with an opportunity to assess whether the absence is condoned by parents and if they are in a position to ensure regular attendance.

Oibreoidh an EWS leis an teaghlach agus le réimse gníomhaireachtaí eile lena chinntiú go mbeidh oideachas ag a gcuid páistí mar is cuí.

The EWS will work with the family and a range of other agencies to ensure that their children are educated appropriately.

Schools in East Antrim

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to confirm which grammar and secondary schools in East Antrim are over-subscribed for the academic year 2009/10.

(AQW 7637/09)

The Minister of Education: Ní bheidh an próiseas aistrithe ón bhunscoil go dtí an iar-bhunscoil críochnaithe go dtí 29 Bealtaine 2009, agus mar sin de, ní bheidh na sonraí deiridh ar eolas againn maidir le meánscoileanna agus scoileanna gramadaí a bhfuil leibhéal ró-iarratais orthu go dtí sin.

The process of transfer from primary to post-primary school will not be completed until 29 May 2009, therefore, final details of secondary and grammar schools which are over-subscribed will not be known until then. The Department does, however, have details of the grammar and secondary schools in East

Antrim that were over-subscribed at first preference stage for the 2009/10 academic year and these are listed below:

- Ulidia Integrated College
- Carrickfergus Grammar School
- Belfast High School

Schools Admissions Criteria

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to ensure that pupils gain entry to either the grammar or secondary school of their choice for the academic year 2009/10. (AQW 7638/09)

The Minister of Education: Faoi shocruithe Rollaithe Oscailte, cuireann tuismitheoirí a dtosaíochtaí in iúl maidir le hiontráil a gcuid páistí ar iar-bhunscoil ainmnithe, agus tá sé mar aidhm ag an chóras tosaíocht na dtuismitheoirí a shásamh nuair is féidir.

Under Open Enrolment arrangements parents express preferences for the admission of their children to a named post-primary school, and the system aims to satisfy parental preference where possible. Parents are advised to name a minimum of three schools on the Transfer Form as it is not realistic to offer every parent and child a guarantee of successful admission to the school named as a first preference.

In this regard the arrangements for 2009/10 are consistent with those that applied in previous years, with parents assessing the likelihood of a successful application based on an examination of published schools' admissions criteria, and in the case of a selective school application, performance in the final Transfer Test. 86.5% of applicants were admitted to their first preference school for the 2008/09 school year and I expect the 2009/10 figure to be in line with this.

Credit Cards Issued to Departmental Staff

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Education (i) how many credit cards have been issued her Department's staff for work purposes; and (ii) in relation to punitive bank charges on these cards, (a) how many have there been; (b) the total cost of the charges; and (c) the reasons for the charges, in each of the last five years. (AQW 7669/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá cárta creidmheasa amháin ag an Roinn Oideachais a úsáideann Oifig Phríobháideach na Roinne. Bhí cárta creidmheasa ag Oifig an Rúnaí Buan go dtí mí Eanáir 2006 fosta.

The Department of Education currently holds one credit card for use by the Departmental Private Office. Until January 2006, the Permanent Secretary's Office also held a credit card. No punitive bank charges have been incurred by either of these credit cards during the last five years.

South Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education if it is her intention to re-appoint the elected and independent members of the South Eastern Education and Library Board, from June 2009 to the end of the Board's term. (AQW 7676/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá athbhunú an bhoird a bhí ar fionraí ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt fós faoi bhreithniú agus fógróidh mé mo chinneadh in am is i dtráth.

The re-instatement of the suspended board of the South Eastern Education and Library Board remains under consideration and I will announce my decision at the appropriate time.

South Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education if the South Eastern Education and Library Board will be reconstituted to remain in legal standing for June 2009. (AQW 7677/09)

The Minister of Education: Bíonn foráil ag reachtaíocht reachtúil ar athbhunú na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne gach ceithre bliana. Dheimhnígh comhairleoirí dlí na Roinne go gciallíonn seo gur féidir leis na Boird reatha fanacht mar atá go dtí deireadh na bliana 2009. Ní gá, mar sin, go ndéanfar athbhunú ar na Boird i mí Mheithimh 2009.

The statutory legislation provides for the Education and Library Boards to be reconstituted in every fourth year. The Department's legal advisers have confirmed that this enables the current Boards to remain in place until the end of 2009. There is no need, therefore, for reconstitution of the Boards to take place in June 2009.

Education and Library Board Targets

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what targets have been set for each Education and Library Board for 2009/10. (AQW 7678/09)

The Minister of Education: Leagadh amach sna litreacha ar Leithdháileadh Bhuiséad 2009/10 na Roinne, a eisíodh chuig gach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne ar 6 Márta 2009, an comhthéacs straitéiseach agus tosaíochtaí dá leithdháiltí buiséid agus tugadh comhairle faoi na tosaíochtaí le haghaidh phleanáil na seirbhísí gaolmhara.

The Department's 2009/10 Budget Allocation letters, which issued to each Education and Library Board on 6 March 2009, set the strategic context and priorities for their budget allocations and advised of the priorities for the planning of related services.

Boards were advised that their allocations are provided to support the delivery of the Department's strategic objectives and the priorities for Education as reflected in the Public Service Agreements (PSAs) underpinning the Executive's Programme for Government (PfG). In addition, Boards were advised that plans for 2009/10 should take account of the forthcoming establishment of the Education and Skills Authority through full and positive engagement in the various strands of the convergence, planning and development programmes. Boards were also advised that they need to reflect the priority that Government attaches to protecting front line services and to ensure also that services are managed to maximise the use of resources, particularly those that are largely demand led e.g. transport, school meals; and that they would be expected to contain HQ administration spend within defined targets and take action to share back office and other services in ways that can release more resources to the front line.

Taking account of the above requirements, and in the interests of ensuring a consistent approach across the 5 Boards, the Department has been developing and finalising a range of key priorities and targets for the period immediately ahead and these were notified to the Boards on 15 May 2009. The key actions and targets include raising standards for all; improving access to high quality education; developing the education workforce; improving the learning environment; and transforming education administration.

Nursery Schools

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how many children were refused entry to a nursery school or nursery unit in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area for September 2009. (AQW 7680/09)

The Minister of Education: Thug Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt le fios don Roinn nuair a cuireadh na próisis iontrála i gcrích ar 1 Bealtaine 2009 nach raibh áit faighte ag 726 páiste a bhí ar lorg áit náiscoilé nó áit in aonad náiscoilé i limistéar Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt do mhí Mheán Fómhair. Tá 243 páiste as an líon sin sa bhliain réamhscoilé dheireanach.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board have advised the Department that 726 children seeking a place in a nursery school or nursery unit in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area for September 2009 were unplaced when the admissions processes ended on 1 May 2009. 243 of these children are in their final preschool year.

Reducing the Spread of Infections in Schools

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education whether there is a policy in schools to ensure that soap is provided in toilets; and what policy is in place to prevent the spread of viruses and infection in schools. (AQW 7691/09)

The Minister of Education: Bíonn dualgas cúraim ar scoileanna chun áiseanna oiriúnacha leithris a sholáthar do dhaltaí agus do bhaill foirne. Áitítear ar dhaltaí scoile agus ar bhaill foirne scoile sláinteachas maith pearsanta a chleachtadh i gcónaí.

Schools have a duty of care to provide suitable toileting facilities for the use of pupils and staff. School pupils and staff are encouraged to practise good personal hygiene at all times.

In response to the current swine flu alert, my Department is working closely with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Public Health Agency to provide advice and guidance

directly to schools and through the Department's website, to reinforce the good personal hygiene message, including regularly washing hands with soap and water, to help reduce the spread of infection in schools.

Association for Quality Education Exams

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education who will fund the Association for Quality Education exams; and if she is aware of any plans to put a policy in place for students with dyslexia. (AQW 7692/09)

The Minister of Education: Department of Education policy on transfer 2010 is described in guidance which will be finalised following a period of consultation.

Tá na teistearna iontrála atá á reachtáil ag an Association for Quality Education Ltd taobh amuigh de na socruithe príomhshrutha le haghaidh Aistriú 2010 agus dá réir sin beidh na scoileanna sin a thaobhaíonn leis an eagraíocht seo freagrach as aon chostais a bhaineann leis an teist.

The entrance tests being offered through the Association for Quality Education Ltd sit outside the mainstream transfer 2010 arrangements and accordingly any costs involved will fall to the schools that have aligned themselves to this organisation. This would include the cost of making any reasonable adjustments required by law and on which schools have been advised, and adjustments of this type may include provision for children with dyslexia.

Transportation of Children to Schools

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education to detail the total cost of taxi fares for the transportation of children to schools, broken down by Education Library Board areas, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7717/09)

The Minister of Education: Ba é an costas iomlán le haghaidh iompar i dtacsaithe le trí bliana anuas ná £22,272,887, agus seo mar a leanas miondealú ar an chostas sin ag gach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne i ngach bliain le trí bliana anuas:

The total cost for taxi transport for the last three school years was £22,272,887, broken down by Education and library Board for each of the last three years as follows:

| Year | BELB | NEELB | SEELB | SELB | WELB |
|--------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 2007/08 | £853,290 | £1,615,000 | £1,425,854 | £1,917,000 | £1,147,641 |
| 2006/07 | £736,104 | £1,790,000 | £1,797,052 | £1,838,000 | £1,163,765 |
| 2005/06 | £696,594 | £2,012,000 | £2,086,759 | £2,097,000 | £1,096,828 |
| Total | £2,285,988 | £5,417,000 | £5,309,665 | £5,852,000 | £3,408,234 |

The majority of the expenditure relates to pupils with a statement of Special Educational Needs and where the statement has indicated that transport must be by taxi.

Departmental Land

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Education when the most recent audit of departmental land was undertaken; and how much unused land the Department currently holds. (AQW 7730/09)

The Minister of Education: Ní leis an Roinn Oideachais (DE) talamh ar bith agus is faoi bhainistíocht na Roinne Airgeadais agus Pearsanra, mar chuid d'Eastát an Rialtais, iad na suíomhanna atá áitithe ag mo Roinn.

The Department of Education (DE) does not own any land and the sites that my Department occupies form part of the Government Estate and are managed by the Department of Finance and Personnel. Consequently, my Department has not carried out an audit of Departmental land and does not hold any unused land.

Craigavon Area Learning Committee

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons why her Department rejected the action plan submitted by the Craigavon Area Learning Committee. (AQW 7744/09)

The Minister of Education: Sonraítear na Socruithe Tacaíochta don Chreatlach Theidlíochta (EF) san imlitir 2008/12 a eisíodh chuig scoileanna i Meitheamh 2008. Leagann seo amach go soléir na tosaíochtaí maidir le cur i bhfeidhm an EF, na critéir a bhaineann le leithdháileadh na heiliminte chomhoibrithe le tacaíocht a thabhairt don obair atá á déanamh ag Pobail Foghlama Ceantair (ALC) agus na hamscalaí a bhaineann le cur i gcrích na pleananna gníomhaíochtaí. Ní leithdháiltear acmhainní le tacaíocht a thabhairt do phleananna gníomhaíochtaí ach amháin nuair a fhreastalaíonn said ar riachtanais mar atá leagtha amach san imlitir agus tá sé tábhachtach mar sin go ndéantar breithniú ar na pleananna gníomhaíochtaí ó gach Pobal foghlama ar bhonn cothrom agus ar bhonn comhsheasmhach.

The Entitlement Framework (EF) Support Arrangements for 2008/09 are detailed in DE Curricular 2008/12 which was issued to schools in June 2008. This clearly set out the priorities for the implementation of the EF, criteria for the allocation of the collaboration element to support the work of Area Learning Communities (ALC) and the timescales for completion of action plans. Resources can only be allocated in support of action plans that meet the requirements set out in the circular and it is therefore important that the action plans from all learning communities are considered equitably and consistently.

Our review of the Craigavon ALC plan for 2008/09 raised a number of issues that required clarification. A revised Action Plan was submitted which did address some of these concerns, however a number remained outstanding and, following a meeting with the ALC Chair and the SELB Development Officers, a further revised action plan was resubmitted at the end of February. The level of funding allocated in March 2009 was in direct correspondence to the costs of actions identified within the plan.

Balmoral High School

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the Post Project Evaluation report into the Balmoral High School, Private Financial Initiative/Public Private Partnerships project. (AQW 7792/09)

The Minister of Education: Níor cuireadh an obair mheasúnaithe i gcrích go fóill. Soláthróidh mé an t-eolas seo nuair a chuirtear ar fáil é.

The evaluation work has still to be completed. I will provide the information when it is available.

St Colman's Primary School

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education when the demolition of St Colman's Primary School, Lambeg, will begin and when the building of the new primary school will commence. (AQW 7793/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá sé sceidealaithe go mbeidh scartáil St Colman's Primary School Lann Bheag mar chuid den chonradh le scoil nua a thógáil. Tá sé beartaithe tús a chur leis an obair níos moille i mbliana.

The demolition of St Colman's PS Lambeg is scheduled to be part of the contract to build the new school. This work is currently programmed to start later this year.

As a result of increased vandalism and antisocial behaviour my Department has recently received a request from the school authorities to demolish the old school in advance of the newbuild contract. This is currently being considered and the school authorities will be advised of the outcome in due course.

DEPARTMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Work Placements

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures are in place to facilitate (i) higher education students; and (ii) further education students, who are unable to secure obligatory work placements, because of the economic downturn. (AQW 7558/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I am advised by the University of Ulster that in the current economic downturn, it has been decided that students on sandwich courses with compulsory placements, leading to the award of a Diploma in Industrial Studies who had been unsuccessful, but who could demonstrate appropriate efforts to find a placement, should be permitted to proceed directly to the final year of study.

The University also agreed that students who had not made sufficient effort to find a place could opt to apply for a leave of absence, so that they could

continue to search for a placement which might possibly be completed before the following academic year.

Queen's University has advised that it is aware that the number of work placements may be reduced due to the current economic climate and it is monitoring the situation.

The University is exploring additional options that will provide students with relevant experience. These include:

- adoption of a more flexible timeframe for the completion of obligatory work placements. For example, some Schools have accepted a 'portfolio' of placement experience provided it meets the 9 month degree programme requirement. In this way a student may undertake a 6 month placement followed by a summer 3 month placement, or complete a part time placement over 15 months.
- broadening the definition of work placement beyond the traditional, for example, accepting work placements within the University, or participation on the Business Education Initiative programme in the US.

In addition, through the University's Degree Plus programme, students are encouraged to reflect on and utilise all aspects of their University experience, including part time paid work, to enhance their employability.

To date, St Mary's University College, Stranmillis University College and the six Further Education (FE) Colleges have advised that they are not experiencing any significant difficulties in finding work placements for students, despite the downturn.

Apprenticeship Placements

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning detail the progress made by his Department in increasing apprenticeship placements. (AQW 7575/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Northern Ireland has seen a significant positive change in relation to Apprenticeships training provision over the past two years. The number of Modern Apprenticeships on the Jobskills programme at 31st August 2007 stood at 5,799. With the introduction of Level 2 apprenticeships in September 2007 and all age apprenticeships in September 2008, the number of apprentices, as of 13 May 2009, stands at 10,265 representing a 77% increase.

Changes in 2008 also gave opportunity for those working reduced contracted hours to avail of apprenticeships and this is believed to have impacted positively in regard to female participation which now stands at 41% compared to the historic trend of 30%.

I trust this information is helpful.

Apprenticeship Placements

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail what progress his Department has made in helping apprentices made redundant during their apprenticeship placement. (AQW 7576/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department has been proactive in its attempt to address the issue of redundant apprentices. Training suppliers are continuing to refer engineering, construction and

automotive apprentices to the Pre-Apprenticeship and Steps to Work programmes. Updated figures will be made available soon. The Department has also been working with specific employers such as Wrightbus, to help stem apprentice redundancies by developing bespoke training support packages.

The economic downturn however, continues to have an effect on some apprentices sustaining employment. It is for this reason I will be making an announcement shortly to advise of other measures my Department will introduce to further assist apprentices and their employers throughout these challenging times.

Departmental Land

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if, in light of the current economic crisis and with rising fuel and food prices, he has any plans to release departmental land for the use of local communities to grow affordable food and make local food more sustainable. (AQW 7703/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The only land owned by my Department is the former Felden Training Centre in Newtownabbey. The Northern Regional College is currently using the Centre to deliver its Training for Success programmes. The College will be relocating this training to its main site when they have completed a newbuild and refurbishment programme. The target date for the relocation is September 2010. At that time the land will become surplus and will be sold in accordance with Land and Property Services guidelines. This will include a trawl within the public sector and will provide the opportunity for other public sector bodies to express an interest.

South Eastern Regional College

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to explain why staff at the South Eastern Regional College have to wait for 12 months to receive their cost of living difference. (AQW 7723/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Pay and conditions of College staff are a matter for the employing authority, the South Eastern Regional College (SERC).

Staff in Further Education Colleges fall into three separate groups for the purposes of pay – non-teaching, teaching, and senior.

Non-teaching staff

The non-teaching pay award is negotiated at national level by the National Joint Council and is implemented locally. Because the Further Education Employers' side and Trade Union Side were unable to reach agreement on the implementation of the 2008/09 pay award, the matter was referred to arbitration. Following a decision in March 2009, the pay agreement was approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Non-teaching staff in the South Eastern Regional College (SERC) received their revised salary rates in April 2009, with arrears scheduled for payment in May 2009.

Teaching staff

Agreement on a three year pay deal for teaching staff, commencing in September 2008 was reached in March 2009. The pay remit was approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel and implemented by the College Employers in April 2009.

Senior Staff

A three year pay remit for Senior staff, commencing in September 2008 was agreed in March 2009. The pay remit has been approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel in April 2009 and is currently being implemented by the College Employers.

South Eastern Regional College

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to explain why staff at the former East Down Institute are not being paid the same rate of pay as staff in Ards and Down as both are employed by the South Eastern Regional College. (AQW 7724/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Pay and conditions of College staff are a matter for the employing authority, the South Eastern Regional College (SERC).

I have been advised by the College that prior to the merger of East Down, North Down and Ards, and Lisburn Institutes, in August 2007, each of these colleges had separate organisational structures, job descriptions and pay rates for staff. Following merger, SERC began the process of reviewing and evaluating all posts. The College is finalising this process in consultation with trade unions, with the aim of ensuring parity in terms and conditions for staff undertaking similar roles throughout the College.

Management and Leadership Development Programme

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he intends to take action to address the problem of companies/applicants for the Management and Leadership Development Programme, who after being accepted to participate, have been told that funding is no longer available and the programme cancelled.

(AQW 7755/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Management and Leadership Development Programme provides bursary support to assist small to medium sized companies to participate on a range of approved management development programmes offered by commercial training providers. Acceptance by the provider to participate in a specific training programme does not guarantee either eligibility or approval for bursary support from the Department. Companies are advised to apply for support well in advance of the intended programme and not to agree any specific start date for training before approval for bursary support has been given from the Department.

Earlier this year, I approved 100% funding across the full range of support available from my Department for management development training to help, particularly small companies, with the difficult economic conditions. For budgeting purposes the support will be offered in tranches throughout the year until the available budget is exhausted. The Management and Leadership Development Programme, in particular, was heavily oversubscribed in the first tranche and the Department announced a temporary suspension of new applications to avoid an over-commitment of available resource.

My officials are examining all existing applications to determine the scope to redirect client companies to less heavily subscribed funding streams to achieve the desired training. As the training programmes take place over the next few weeks it will become clear the extent to which funding commitments will crystallise into actual expenditure and will determine the budget available for subsequent tranches. Far from cancelling the programme, I expect that approvals for the second tranche of the Management and Leadership Development Programme will begin in June.

DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

European Sustainable Competitiveness Programme

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) to detail the money that is available under the sub priority 2.3 NITB under the European Sustainable Competitiveness Programme for Northern Ireland 2007-13; and (ii) how monies under this have been or will be allocated to the various signature projects in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6632/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): To date, the Executive has approved the allocation of £25 million European Regional Development Fund to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) from the EU Sustainable Development Programme. Up to £21.7 million has been allocated to the Titanic Signature Project and the remainder to Product and Market Development.

The requirement for further EU allocations to Signature Projects is being kept under review by NITB and the Department.

Manufacturing Audit

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the manufacturing audit that her Department is undertaking. (AQW 7402/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI have commissioned an Overview of the Northern Ireland Manufacturing Sector report which I am expecting to receive in the near future.

Additionally, the Economic Development Forum (EDF), which I Chair, has recently established a Manufacturing Advisory Sub-Group with the aim of developing and agreeing an action plan to address the current difficulties faced by manufacturers in Northern Ireland.

My officials recently met with the Managing Director of Wrightbus, and he agreed to Chair the sub-group. The terms of reference and membership have been agreed and the first meeting took place on the 8 May 2009.

DETI remains fully committed to Northern Ireland's manufacturing sector and recognises the significant contribution it makes to the Northern Ireland economy. It is for this reason that DETI's Corporate Plan (2008/9 – 2010/11) has made improving Northern Ireland's manufacturing and private services productivity its top priority.

Chief Executive of the Consumer Council

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for a breakdown of the total cost of the leaving party for the Chief Executive of the Consumer Council; and if this includes an audio visual film, presentation or DVD, who owns the copyright. (AQW 7470/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am advised that, on 24 March 2009, the Board of the Consumer Council decided to hold a stakeholder and partnership engagement event, the first of its kind the Council had held since 2004. This event, which was held on 8 April 2009, was designed to mark the Chief Executive's departure and to allow stakeholders to meet the new Chairperson informally. The Consumer Council has informed the Department that the itemised direct and indirect costs (including VAT) of the event were as follows:

| Direct Costs | £ |
|--|---------------|
| Food and drinks (including £70 for alcoholic drinks) | 1,360 |
| Waiter service | 375 |
| Music | 450 |
| Invitations | 150 |
| Decorations | 150 |
| Hire of audio visual equipment | 500 |
| Hire of plasma screens | 665 |
| Subtotal | £3,650 |
| Indirect Costs | |
| Filming and making of DVD | 3,622 |
| Total | £7,272 |

The Consumer Council has advised that the DVD was produced as a corporate resource and will be used over the next number of years to demonstrate the significant transformation and achievements delivered by the Consumer Council over the last four years. Copyright remains the property of the Consumer Council.

The Department contacted the Council on 9 April to obtain details of the cost of the event and assurances relating to the use of the DVD. On 15 April it received the Council's rationale for the event, and an assurance from the Chairperson that the Consumer Council is committed to delivering value for money and being a careful custodian of public funds. The importance of adherence to these principles was reinforced by Departmental representatives at its normal quarterly Oversight and Liaison meeting with the Council held on 12 May. For my part, I regard it as essential, especially in the current economic circumstances, for public bodies such as the General Consumer Council to give the taxpayer and ratepayer maximum value for money.

Wind and Sea Turbines

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what contact he has had with private enterprises to help introduce off-shore wind and sea turbines. (AQW 7568/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I visited the MCT turbine in Strangford Lough in July 2008 and have received and responded to two letters on this subject: one from an offshore wind developer and one from a tidal stream developer. My officials have also had a series of meetings with potential investors in tidal stream energy and offshore wind in Northern Ireland as part of work aimed at securing marine energy resources.

DETI is paving the way for investment in offshore energy by conducting a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of its proposals to develop offshore wind and marine renewables in NI waters. This will allow environmental matters to be considered at an early stage in the development of our plans and programmes to promote sustainable marine energy development. It is intended that this process will lead to a commercial call for leases of the sea bed for renewable energy purposes by The Crown Estate in 2010.

Departmental Land

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if, in light of the current economic crisis, and with rising fuel and food prices, she has any plans to release departmental land for the use of local communities to grow affordable food and make local food more sustainable. (AQW 7644/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI's land is held primarily as serviced sites at industrial estates to be leased to client companies with growth plans based on an eligible business case.

I have no large-scale plans to release this land for the use of local communities to grow affordable food. Industrial estates by their very nature can be dangerous places, given the high level of heavy goods vehicle traffic using the estate roads, and therefore I would not wish to encourage any increase in non-industrial and pedestrian traffic on Invest NI's industrial landholding.

However, recently Invest NI has been approached by, and is in discussions with, a community group regarding the use of 5 acres of its land. The proposed use is on a seasonal basis, as temporary allotments, and part of a community initiative for unemployed people in that area. The land in question is isolated from the rest of the industrial estate and has its own separate access, therefore mitigating the safety concerns in this particular case.

In addition, where Invest NI has undeveloped land which would be capable of being used for agricultural purposes, Invest NI will let it out to farmers on a seasonal basis for conacre use, at a rent set by Land & Property Services.

Invest NI's landholding is ultimately available for the strategic growth plans of Invest NI client companies. All of its conacre lets can be terminated at 4 weeks notice, to ensure immediate availability of land for this purpose. However, within the current economic climate, these small-scale agricultural uses are deemed to be an effective use of the land whilst at the same time deriving benefit for the local community.

New Small Businesses

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline what grants are available to start up a new small business. (AQW 7714/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI's new Enterprise Development Programme has been operational from April 2009, and has replaced the Start a Business Programme. The Enterprise Development Programme, is the umbrella name for 2 programmes:

- (i) The Go For It Programme is targeted at Early Stage and Start-Ups and offers a range of provision to improve business capability in the form of training, mentoring, signposting and referrals. Whilst there is no grant available within the new programme, participants will be given advice on their finances, marketing, sales and other fundamentals which are likely to give their business the best possible chance of success in these more difficult times.
- (ii) The Growth Programme is for existing small businesses with growth potential. All participating companies will be assigned a Personal Business Adviser to assess their needs and guide them towards the right mix of

training and advice. All participating companies are eligible for the training workshops, which will address the most common skills gaps among growing businesses.

The Programmes are delivered by Enterprise Northern Ireland. Enterprise NI operates a loan fund which can be used to enable companies which cannot get bank loans to fund their start-up.

Invest NI can also offer support to start-up businesses through the Export Start portfolio. This support is focused on innovative local businesses that can demonstrate the potential for substantial export growth and covers product and process innovation, capability development, exporting and investment. This leads such clients into a wider suite of programmes which can assist with innovation, market support, business improvements etc.

Chicken Waste Incinerator

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if her Department and Invest NI have held any discussions with Rose Energy about subsidising operational costs on an ongoing basis, if its application for a chicken waste incinerator at Glenavy were to receive planning approval. (AQW 7756/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Neither DETI nor Invest NI has held discussions with Rose Energy about subsidising operational costs. If Rose Energy were to receive planning approval, Invest NI would not subsidise operational costs on an ongoing basis.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Road Safety Grants

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what will be the timescale for applications for Road Safety Grants for local groups following the proposed abolition of funding to the Road Safety Council. (AQW 7293/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Wilson): The Department wrote to local road safety committees on 18 December 2008 asking them to submit their bids for funding for the 2009/2010 financial year. The Road Safety Council (RSC) took great exception to the Department contacting local committees directly and instructed them not to do so. Following my meeting with representatives of the RSC on 27 February 2009, when I confirmed that the decision to channel funding away from central administration and into front line activities would stand, the RSC hand delivered bids from fourteen local committees on 13 March 2009. The Belfast committee, having decided not to accept instructions from the RSC, had sent their bid directly to the Department on 4 March 2009.

Historically, bids for financial assistance had to be with the Department by 30 January of each year, in order to allow sufficient time for proper evaluation prior to the start of the new financial year. Unfortunately, the RSC instructions to local committees resulted in considerable slippage in the normal financial timetable.

Bids from local committees are treated as a priority, and the Department aims to turn them around in a matter of weeks, if not days. Any offer of financial assistance is left open for three months from the date of the letter of offer.

Due to the lateness of the bids, local committees, who have been offered financial assistance by way of a 'Letter of Offer' were asked to accept and formally respond to the offer within two weeks, but of course that did not affect the three-month period of validity.

To compensate for the unfortunate delay in the receipt of bids, the Department has not yet set a deadline for the receipt of applications for financial assistance. However, the Department will write to local committees soon to confirm that a deadline of 30 June 2009 will be applied.

Public Procurement Contracts

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the companies that were successful in securing public procurement contracts in works, services and goods through the Department, in the last two years and the percentage of those that were from the SME or the Social Economy sectors. (AQW 7437/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In the last two years the companies in the list below were successful in securing public procurement contracts in works, services and goods through my Department. Where it has been possible to identify their status, I can confirm that 42% of these companies were from the SME sector or Social Economy sector.

| | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Aardvark Geological Services | Dennis McCoy Consulting |
| Abacus Business Forms | Document Processing Agency Ltd |
| ACR | Elite Promotions |
| Addleshaw Goddard | Enfonic |
| Advance Stamp & Plate | ENSIS Ltd |
| AEA Energy & Environment | Entec UK Ltd |
| AFIC | Environment Agency |
| Agri-Food Biosciences Institute | ERIC Ltd |
| Allen-Mellon Environmental Ltd | Evolve |
| Amtec | Excite Exhibition and Display |
| Andrew Rushworth | Faber Maunsell |
| Antrim Supplies Ltd | Fortoak Ltd |
| Arthur Cox Northern Ireland | Gaia Law |
| Atkins Ltd | Golder Associates (UK) Ltd |
| Banner Business Supplies | Grafton Recruitment Ltd |
| BDO StoyHayward | HELM Corporation |
| Bearing Point Consultancy | i2 Ltd |
| Blueprint Appointments | Information Risk Management |
| Bond Solon Training | Insight |
| Bryan Hynds | Irish Arms Historical Reproductions |
| BT Training Solutions | iSonic Ltd |
| Burlington Uniforms Ltd | Jackie Morgan |
| Capita Business Services Ltd | Jacobs |
| Capita Symonds Ltd | JH Print & Packaging |
| CDM Ireland | JNCC |
| CDS | Julie Martin Associates |
| Classic Career Clothing | JVA Analytical Ltd |
| Colin Buchanan & Partners | KBS Computer Supplies Ltd |
| Colin Hatrick | KOREC |
| Community Technical Aid | KPMG |
| Compass Service UK Ltd | Manns Williams |
| Comtrol | Manogue Architects |
| DAP | MBA Group Ltd |
| De La Rue Smurfit | McClure Watters |
| Deli Lites | McGovern Contracts |
| Deloitte & Touche | Minprint |
| Deloitte MCS Ltd | Morrow Communications |

| | |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| Mr Kerry Leonard | RW Pierce & Co |
| National Museums and Galleries of N.I. | Sam Hutchinson & Co |
| Natural Environment Research Council | SGS (UK) Ltd |
| Neopost | Shred-It Northern Ireland |
| Nick Brannon | Simon Jersey Limited |
| Northern Ireland Environment Link | SM Cuffey Landscapes |
| Nukey Services | Social and Market Research |
| Oakdene Services | Sopra Group |
| Office Depot | Sustainable NI |
| PA Consulting Group | Telford Training Consultants |
| Paul Logan Architects | Tennants UK Ltd |
| Piaggio Ltd | Tim Birley Consultancy |
| Plastisign | TSO |
| PriceWaterhouseCoopers | TSO Ireland |
| Priory Press | TTC 2000 |
| Pro-Arc Limited | Unicomarine Ltd |
| Queen's University of Belfast | Universities Press / Graham & Heslip |
| Quercus | University of Ulster |
| Quicks Office Supplies | Veolia Environmental Services |
| Redfinn Boats | Waters Chromatography Ireland Ltd |
| Research and Marketing Plus | White Young Green Consulting |
| RPS Consultants Ltd | Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust |
| RSK Ireland | Windmill Print |
| RSPB | WS Atkins |
| Rusk Design | Zing Design |

Planning Applications

Mrs Long asked the Minister of the Environment (i) to what degree Planning Circular PC 0307 is material in the consideration and determination of Planning Applications; and (ii) if this is reflected in (a) Planning Service; and (b) Planning Appeals Commission decisions, prior to and subsequent to its issue in August 2007.

(AQW 7456/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Circular (PC 03/07): “Assessing Planning Applications for Residential Development in Urban Areas, Villages and Other Small Settlements” is internal guidance which seeks to remind Planning Service staff of the full policy context when assessing planning applications for residential development in Urban Areas, Villages and other Small Settlements as a matter of good practice. It is not new policy but the pulling together of existing policy and guidance, which is already in the public domain, in a format which is easily accessible for staff.

The circular and the policy context are material considerations reflected in Planning Service decisions. Prior to issue of the Circular in August 2007, the existing policy context was a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.

Decisions issued by the Planning Appeals Commission are a matter for the Commission.

Infill Developments

Mrs Long asked the Minister of the Environment if he has raised the issue of the cumulative effects of successive infill developments on character, amenity and infrastructure with (a) the Minister for Regional Development; (b) the Roads Service; or (c) NI Water; and whether the Departments take a coordinated approach to this issue. (AQW 7461/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The assessment of the impact of any development proposals on the character of the area or on residential amenity rests solely with Planning Service.

DRD Roads Service and NI Water provide consultation advice to Planning Service in relation to their stakeholder functions, including the cumulative effects on infrastructure where this is appropriate. This is standard procedure and I have not had to raise this issue with the relevant Minister.

Tree Preservation Orders

Mrs Long asked the Minister of the Environment what criteria, processes, and considerations are involved when deciding to apply a temporary Tree Preservation Order on a site subject to development proposals. (AQW 7464/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There is no provision in legislation for “temporary” Tree Preservation Orders. The Department can impose a Provisional Tree Preservation Order which protects trees for a period of six months. This allows the Department time to carry out a detailed tree survey and decide if all or some of the trees in question should be protected.

The key considerations used for imposing a Provisional Tree Preservation Order include the following: the amenity value of the tree/trees, group of trees or woodland in question individually or collectively within their context; degree of public visibility; historical importance; rarity value; and whether they can assist in strengthening a planning condition.

Other considerations include the condition, age and species of such trees and any health and safety issues arising especially in relation to adjoining structures and roads.

Based on the above considerations the Department will decide, following a landscape and visual assessment, whether or not to proceed with a Provisional Tree Preservation Order.

Bumblebee Numbers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment has he had any discussion with countryside bodies or other departments in light of recent decreases in bumblebee numbers. (AQW 7475/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has recently published two documents; a Regional Red Data List of Bees; and The State of Ireland’s Bees; in conjunction with the National Parks and Wildlife Service in the Republic of Ireland.

These reports have highlighted habitat loss and fragmentation as an important factor causing the decrease in bumblebee numbers. NIEA has encouraged the adoption of a range of site and habitat measures which benefit bumblebees in discussions with Northern Ireland Government Departments, most notably DARD, and voluntary conservation bodies.

In the new Countryside Management Scheme administered by DARD, farmers can receive payment to plant a ‘pollen and nectar mixture’ as one of the habitat measures. This positive initiative will provide additional habitat for bumblebees.

Enforcement Staff

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment for the reasons that enforcement staff were not available to go out to enforcement calls for almost four weeks March and April 2009. (AQW 7477/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Enforcement staff from throughout the Department were available for enforcement calls in March and April 2009. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency’s (NIEA) Water

Management Unit enforcement staff attended 320 reports of alleged pollution during March and April 2009. Their Environmental Crime Unit colleagues carried out 165 visits and inspections during this period.

Visits were conducted as normal by staff from the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) and Planning Service. During March and April 2009, the DVA planned and conducted 55 Enforcement Operations. Likewise, all Planning Service enforcement staff were available to carry out normal enforcement duties (including site inspections) during this period.

M2 Widening Scheme

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any water pollution incidents his Department investigated which occurred during the M2 widening scheme. (AQW 7510/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency has not investigated any pollution incidents as a result of the M2 widening scheme.

Ulster Farm By-Products Operation in Glenavy

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any recent reports of pollution his Department has investigated in relation to the Ulster Farm By-products operation in Glenavy. (AQW 7511/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In the period 1 September 2008 to 7 May 2009, four reports of water pollution in the vicinity of Ulster Farm By-Products were made to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

Pollution was reported on 9 November, 16 November, 2 December and 21 December 2008. All four cases were investigated and no pollution was detected in the vicinity of Ulster Farm By-Products.

Road Safety Council

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of the Environment to explain the decision of his Department to cease funding for the Road Safety Council. (AQW 7522/09)

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) reviews of 1997 and 2002 concluded that the work of the Council did not significantly enhance the Department's road safety activities or represent good value for money.

The current review by PA Consulting Group is the most comprehensive and critical evaluation of the Council to date. 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 it also reported that the Council and the committees had failed to address key recommendations identified in previous reviews.

Senior Civil Servant Bonuses

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment how much was paid in bonuses to senior Civil Servants in his Department in (i) 2003/04; (ii) 2004/05; (iii) 2005/06; (iv) 2006/07; and (v) 2007/08. (AQW 7538/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The following table provides a breakdown of the number and total of bonuses paid to the Senior Civil Servants in DOE from 2003/04 to 2007/08.

| Dept | 2003/04 | | 2004/05 | | 2005/06 | | 2006/07 | | 2007/08 | |
|------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| | No. | Total | No. | Total | No. | Total | No. | Total | No. | Total |
| DOE | 10 | £40,000 | 14 | £57,250 | 14 | £78,500 | 12 | £84,000 | 11 | £86,750 |

River Pollution

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the sum total of all fines imposed by the courts for river pollution offences; and (ii) the sum total of all ‘payment of costs’ sanctions ordered by courts against river polluters, in each of the last five years. (AQW 7590/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In the last 5 years, January 2004 to December 2008, fines totalling £271,125 in relation to offences under the Water (NI) Order 1999, have been imposed by Courts throughout Northern Ireland.

The sum of all costs payable through sanctions ordered totalled £32,097.09.

The breakdown of these figures is detailed in the table below.

FINES AND COSTS FOR PERIOD 2004 – 2008

| Year | Fines | Analysis Costs | Court Costs | Total |
|---------------|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| 2004 | £88,575 | £4,119.63 | £7,262.00 | £99,956.63 |
| 2005 | £42,700 | £1,294.52 | £1,949.16 | £45,943.68 |
| 2006 | £74,100 | £6,179.66 | £1,269.49 | £81,549.15 |
| 2007 | £48,700 | £5,868.41 | £1,171.00 | £55,739.41 |
| 2008 | £17,050 | £2,513.22 | £470.00 | £20,033.22 |
| Totals | £271,125 | £19,975.44 | £12,121.65 | £303,222.09 |

River Pollution

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment whether the money paid in fines and costs imposed by courts for river pollution offences is allocated to his Department, to the Department of Finance or to the Treasury of the United Kingdom. (AQW 7591/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Fines imposed by Courts are credited by the Northern Ireland Court Service to the UK Consolidated Fund and paid to the Treasury. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency can claim for reimbursement of costs (incurred for the investigation and clean-up) directly from the polluter.

PSV Tests for Taxis

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the reasons for the recent price rise for PSV tests for taxis; and to provide a breakdown of this cost. (AQW 7596/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Under the HM Treasury Fees and Charges Guide the Agency is required to recover in full the costs associated with a particular activity.

The recent PSV Taxi Licence fee increase of £12 (9%) covers increased costs arising from inflation and pay awards over the 3 year period from April 2007 to March 2010.

PSV TAXI LICENCE FEE

| | |
|--|----------------|
| Direct Costs | |
| Labour | £ 44.64 |
| Enforcement Cost | £ 20.00 |
| Taxi Plating | £ 22.05 |
| Taxi IT System Costs | £ 9.93 |
| Booking System | £ 2.03 |
| Testing Equipment PFI | £ 4.11 |
| Overhead Costs | |
| Labour (e.g. IT, finance, personnel & customer services staff) | £ 15.82 |
| Overheads (e.g. IT, stationery, training, travel, telephone) | £ 8.40 |
| Accommodation (rent, rates, heat, light, security, cleaning) | £ 8.17 |
| Central DOE/DRD/DFP charges | £ 3.28 |
| Total Costs | £138.43 |
| Proposed Fee | £138.50 |

PSV Tests for Taxis

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the costs of; and (ii) the reasons for the differences in costs between a taxi taking a PSV test and a car taking an MOT test. (AQW 7597/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Under the HM Treasury Fees and Charges Guide the Agency is required to recover in full the costs of its operations.

The cost of the PSV Taxi licence is £138.50 and the cost of an MOT test for a private car is £30.50

The difference in the cost of a taxi PSV licence and a car MOT test is due to significant differences in the PSV and MOT processes. An MOT test involves a physical inspection of the vehicle. A PSV test is made up of a physical inspection of the vehicle, an assessment of the suitability of the applicant to operate a taxi and the production and issue of taxi plates. IT system costs and a contribution to enforcement activity are also included in the PSV fee.

Wind Turbines

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of the Environment which planning policies apply to domestic and commercial wind turbines. (AQW 7627/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning applications for wind turbines are assessed in the context of Policy PSU 12 'Renewable Energy', contained in "A Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland". Other material considerations in the assessment of such proposals include any other relevant planning policy, such as the policies contained in area plans, the responses of statutory consultees such as the Environmental Health Department and the District Council, and any third party representations.

Draft Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 18 'Renewable Energy' which was published for consultation on 23 November 2007, also became a material consideration for determining applications at that time. Subject to Executive clearance, I hope to publish PPS 18 in June 2009. It will supersede PSU 12 when it is published in final form.

These policies do not apply to off-shore wind turbines as these are not subject to control under the land use planning system.

Planning Enforcements

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment how many incidences involving planning enforcements have been responded to within the target response times in 2007 and 2008. (AQW 7629/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department did not compile statistics on enforcement cases prior to 31 March 2009 hence the information requested is not available.

My Department has been working to improve the recording of enforcement cases and this work has involved modifying the existing enforcement data base. An exercise to input data into the new system is ongoing. It is anticipated that statistical information on performance against agreed targets will be available from September 2009 for live enforcement cases as at 1 April 2009.

Irish Hare

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment, given the latest figures that show a significant increase in the number of hares, when he will consult on hare preservation. (AQW 7630/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The consultation on the review of the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985, which took place last year considered the issue of statutory protection for the Irish hare for the longer term. There was a broad agreement from respondents that efforts to support the maintenance and restoration of suitable habitat offers the best means of achieving long term sustainability of the Irish hare population, rather than giving the species permanent protection under the Wildlife Order. This is the approach I propose to pursue.

Departmental Land

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of the Environment if, in light of the current economic crisis, and with rising fuel and food prices, he has any plans to release departmental land for the use of local communities to grow affordable food and make local food more sustainable. (AQW 7645/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The vast majority of lands owned by the Department fall into one of three categories: Country Parks, Nature Reserves and Historic Monuments in State Care.

I have no plans at present to release any of the Department's land for the use of local communities to grow affordable food, but will keep this possibility under review.

Abstraction Licenses

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to list the abstraction licenses that are used on the Moyola River and when they are due to expire. (AQW 7648/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Table below lists the authorisations/licences issued for abstractions and impoundment activities on the Moyola River. Licences are not time limited but the Department of the Environment has powers to review, modify and/or revoke licences if required under the Water Abstraction and Impoundment (Licensing) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006.

| Company Name | Volume M3 per day | Sector | Date Authorised | Licence Issued |
|------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Northern Ireland Water | 20,000 | Public Water Supply | N/A | 26/03/2007 |
| Moyola Trustees | 175,000 | Hydro Power | 20/03/2008 | |

Abstraction Licenses

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment (i) what his Department is doing to ensure that abstraction license owners on the Moyola River are abiding by the EU Water Framework Directive; and (ii) what enforcement measures are in place. (AQW 7649/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Water Abstraction and Impoundment (Licensing) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 came into operation on the 1 February 2007. The implementation of this legislation fulfils Northern Ireland's obligation to the European Commission under both the Water Framework and Habitats Directives, to establish a water resource management, assessment and licensing regime.

Once an authorisation/licence is issued, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) will inspect the relevant operation to assess compliance. NIEA has powers under the legislation to serve an enforcement notice where conditions of an authorisation or licence are not being complied with or where an authorised activity has had, is having, or is likely to have a significant adverse impact on the water environment.

Enforcement notices will stipulate the steps required to remedy the non-compliance and to address the adverse, or likely adverse impact, on the environment.

Irish Hare

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what evidence his Department has received that the rural community and the general public support permanent protection of the Irish Hare. (AQW 7660/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has received correspondence from members of the public, many from rural areas, supporting permanent protection for the Irish hare. However, the majority of such correspondence related to banning hare coursing, which I do not believe is a primary conservation issue.

My Department is also aware of post card campaigns undertaken by the League Against Cruel Sports calling for permanent protection, principally as a means of preventing hare coursing.

Irish Hare

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment if he would consider giving permanent protection to the Irish Hare. (AQW 7661/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The consultation on the review of the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985, which took place last year considered the issue of statutory protection for the Irish hare for the longer term. There was a broad agreement from respondents that efforts to support the maintenance and restoration of suitable habitat offers the best means of achieving long term sustainability of the Irish hare population, rather than giving the species permanent protection under the Wildlife Order. This is the approach I propose to pursue.

Irish Hare

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment if the Irish Hare's inclusion on the Quarry Species list, has created confusion over its temporary protected status. (AQW 7662/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I am not aware of any confusion arising during the periods that temporary Special Protection Orders have been in operation. My Department has worked closely with relevant bodies representing the country sports community to ensure that the level of legal protection has been clear.

Planning Applications

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment pursuant to his answer to AQW 7317/09, to detail (i) the quality assurance process, including the date of public consultation and implementation; and (ii) the delay implications it has for freedom of information requests and requests to Divisional Planning Offices from members of the public. (AQW 7683/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In 2007, the Statistics and Registration Service Act established an independent UK Statistics Authority to promote and safeguard the production and publication of Official Statistics. The Act required the UK Statistics Authority to prepare and publish a Code of Practice for Official Statistics and assess compliance against it. Ministers in Northern Ireland supported the extension of the legislation, and thus the Code to Northern Ireland. Further details on The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 may be obtained from The Office of Public Sector Information

http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2007/ukpga_20070018_en_1).

The Code of Practice was published on 6th January 2009 and contains eight principles and, in relation to each, a statement of associated practices. It also contains three more detailed protocols – on user engagement; on the release of statistics; and on the use of administrative data for statistical purposes. The Code has been framed to support the assessment of compliance by the UK Statistics Authority. Taken together, the principles and protocols of the Code are intended to ensure: that the range of official statistics meets the needs of users; that the statistics are produced, managed and disseminated to high standards; and that the statistics are well explained. Further details on the code of practice may be obtained from the Statistics Authority website at, www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk.

As required under Section 11(1) of the Act, the Code does not cover requirements in relation to ‘pre-release’ access to statistics. Pre-Release Access Orders provide the rules and principles relating to the granting of such access. The Code applies as if it included these Orders. Further details regarding The Pre-release Access to Official Statistics Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 is available from The Office of Public Sector Information, http://www.opsi.gov.uk/sr/sr2009/nisr_20090071_en_1.

To protect the integrity of the Official Statistics advance, or pre-release access to the statistics is restricted to a small number of officials and the Minister. As of 1st April 2009, upon enactment of the legislation the pre-release access period reduced to 24 hours. This applies across all departments and agencies for the dissemination of Official Statistics.

Planning Applications entered and stored in the Agency’s computer system are raw un-cleansed, un-validated and incomplete. Planning Service undertakes a quality-assurance process which seeks to remove inaccuracies in the raw data. This work takes time to complete but is essential to ensure that statistics released are produced using information which has been cleansed and verified to the quality principles outlined in the code of practice. This is fundamental to the release of statistical information and there is a number of quality-assurance protocols developed.

With regards to the quality-assurance process and the public consultation and implementation, Planning Service along with all NI Departments and Agencies who produce Official Statistics adhere to the Code of Practice and its principles and protocols. This was determined when NI Assembly Ministers agreed to the extension of the legislation to Northern Ireland. The Statistics Authority and The Office for National Statistics produced the Code of Practice and the protocols and further information and details regarding the quality-assurance protocols, public consultation and implementation may be obtained from the Office for National Statistics at, www.ons.gov.uk.

In response to the delay implications it has for freedom of information requests and requests to Divisional Planning Offices from members of the public, my predecessor wrote to members in December 2007 informing of the changes to the dissemination of statistical information from Planning Service. The public were informed of the new service and changes in a press release of 24 October 2007. Since these notifications, all data provided in response to queries from either members of the assembly or the public is sourced from the Official Statistics publication databases. The timetable for release of Official Planning Statistics is available from the Agency website at http://www.planningni.gov.uk/index/tools/stats_timetable.pdf. Only cleansed, validated, quality assured and published data is provided in response to a request for information.

There is a delay between the reporting period end and when the Official Statistics are published. This is the same for all Departments and Agencies who produce Official Statistics.

However, Planning Service is seeking to reduce the time taken to prepare statistics for publication. If a request for information refers to data that has been through the quality assurance process, it will be responded to as normal. If the data requested has not been through the quality assurance process, the requester will be informed, within 20 working days, that the information cannot yet be disclosed as it would not be in the public interest to release information that has not been fully quality assured as required by the Statistical Code of Practice. The requester will be informed of when the information will become available.

Planning Service will continue to regularly review statistical procedures to keep cleansing, validation and quality assurance process times to a minimum.

Planning Applications

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment pursuant to his answer to AQW 7317/09, to detail (i) the new statistical code of practice, including date of implementation; and (ii) what delay implications it has

for freedom of information requests and requests to Divisional Planning Offices from members of the public.
(AQW 7685/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In 2007, the Statistics and Registration Service Act established an independent UK Statistics Authority to promote and safeguard the production and publication of Official Statistics. The Act required the UK Statistics Authority to prepare and publish a Code of Practice for Official Statistics and assess compliance against it. Ministers in Northern Ireland supported the extension of the legislation, and thus the Code to Northern Ireland. Further details on The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 may be obtained from The Office of Public Sector Information

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release information that has not been fully quality assured as required by the Statistical Code of Practice. The requester will be informed of when the information will become available.

Planning Service will continue to regularly review statistical procedures to keep cleansing, validation and quality assurance process times to a minimum.

High Hedges

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment when he intends to bring forward legislation on high hedges. (AQW 7686/09)

The Minister of the Environment: As any scheme to deal with the issue of high hedges will be operated by local government I must be conscious of the impact on Councils of the Review of Public Administration and our intention to implement the agreed local government reorganisation package by 2011. I also have to be mindful of the competing priorities and resource constraints I am facing. In these circumstances, I intend to undertake the engagement process with the eleven new Councils after they have been elected in May 2011.

Irish Hare

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment how his Department and the PSNI co-operate to prevent hare coursing. (AQW 7695/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Coursing of Irish Hares has been banned in Northern Ireland since 2004 by a Special Protection Order issued on an annual basis by the Department of the Environment. This makes it an offence to hold a coursing event or to course Irish Hares.

Any reports of illegal hare coursing brought to the attention of the Wildlife Officer in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) are reported to the PSNI's Wildlife Liaison Officer for investigation.

The NIEA also chairs the local Partnership Against Wildlife Crime Group. This Group has representatives from nature conservation, animal welfare, Government Agencies and Departments, PSNI and from country sports clubs. The Group meets regularly to share information on wildlife crime including illegal hare coursing.

Irish Hare

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of whether the Irish hare should continue to be a game species. (AQW 7696/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Wildlife Order review has considered the issue of statutory protection for the Irish hare in the longer term for conservation purposes. The consultation on the Order indicated general agreement that the Irish Hare should continue to be a game species.

Irish Hare

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to outline how the Irish hare population has changed over the past 10 years. (AQW 7697/09)

The Minister of the Environment: During the mid 1990s, the Department of the Environment funded a study at Queen's University into the distribution and ecology of the Irish Hare in Northern Ireland. The study demonstrated that although widespread throughout Northern Ireland, the Irish Hare occurred at low densities of around 1-2 per km². This was the first comprehensive survey of the Irish Hare population and the observation prompted the Department to publish an Irish Hare Species Action Plan in 2000. The Plan had the following three main targets:

1. Maintain the existing range and demonstrate a population increase by 2005;
2. Double the present population by 2010 over as much of the range as possible; and
3. Maintain and increase the area and quality of suitable hare habitat.

To follow up on the first two targets, the Department funded Queen's University to undertake a series of night driven spotlight transect surveys to estimate the hare population throughout Northern Ireland. This survey commenced in 2002. After the 2004 results were published, and to provide sound evidence for future Special Protection Orders, it was decided that there should be annual surveys up to 2010.

The full published series of Irish Hare surveys acquired to date is as follows:

| Year | Mean estimated density hares/km2 (Confidence Intervals)* | Total estimated abundance (Confidence Intervals)* |
|------|---|---|
| 2002 | 1.00 (0.50-1.80) | 14,000 (7,000 - 25,200) |
| 2004 | 5.11 (4.23 – 6.16) | 72,000 (59,700 - 86,900) |
| 2005 | 3.10 (2.49 – 3.87) | 43,700 (35,000 - 54,400) |
| 2006 | 2.57 (1.91 – 3.46) | 42,600 (28,600 – 63,400) |
| 2007 | 4.03 (2.81-5.79) | 57,100 (39,800 – 82,000) |
| 2008 | 2.86 (2.16 - 3.79) | 40,500 (30,613 – 53,700) |

* Range as confirmed by statistics

DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Civil Service

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the equal pay claim for Civil Service staff; and when these payments will be made. (AQW 7231/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): Equal pay claims have been lodged with the Industrial Tribunals and are now the subject of legal processes. At the same time, discussions with NIPSA are on-going in effort to establish the parameters within which a negotiated settlement to this issue might be reached. This will inform consideration by me, in conjunction with my colleagues in the Executive, as to how the matter should be taken forward. I am unable to provide any further specific details at present as regards when this matter will be resolved but I am keen that it is brought to a conclusion as quickly as possible.

Public Procurement Contracts

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the companies that were successful in securing public procurement contracts in works, services and goods through the Department, in the last two years and the percentage of those that were from the SME or the Social Economy sectors. (AQW 7438/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The following firms have entered into contracts with the Department of Finance and Personnel in the period 1 April 2007 to 31 March 2009.

| Works | |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| Cannon Pest Control | John Graham (Dromore) Ltd |
| CM3 Ltd | JJ McAdam & Sons |
| Faithful & Gould | NIAVAC Communication Ltd |
| George Watson Joinery | Walls to Workstations Ltd |
| H&J Martin, Belfast | Wm Dowling Ltd, Belfast |
| Services | |
| Access to Benefits | ISTMET Ltd |
| Apple Recruitment | Jones and Cassidy Solicitors |

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Works | |
| Aspect | Joseph Flanigan & Son |
| Asset Management Ireland | Kainos |
| Baker Tilly Mooney Moore | Lagan Technologies |
| Banner Business Supplies | Lockheed Martin UK |
| BrownMack | Lyle Bailie International |
| BSS | Market Research NI Ltd |
| British Telecom PLC | McConnells Off site storage |
| Cable & Wireless | Mentoring Connection |
| Capita Business Services Ltd | Microsoft |
| Carlton Baxter | Navigator Blue |
| Centroid Systems | Neueda |
| CMC Limited | Nicholson and Bass |
| Change Management Consultancy Support | Northgate Information Solutions Plc |
| Dell | PA Consulting |
| Deloitte & Touche | Pearn Kandola |
| DLA Piper | Pentagon Solutions |
| DMG Services | Photoarc Surveys |
| Dr Donncha Hanna | PricewaterhouseCoopers |
| Dr Pamela Campanelli | Radisson Roe Park Hotel |
| DX Network Services | RMA Systems |
| EG Information Consulting Limited | Robert Campton |
| Eircom (UK) Ltd | Royal Mail |
| Envita | RW Pierce & Co |
| FGS McClure Watters | School & Office Supplies |
| Fire IMC | Selex Communications |
| Fitzroy Contracts | Senator International |
| Fonacab | Siemens |
| Grafton Recruitment | Social and Market Research |
| Hamilton Architects | Sodexo |
| Help the Aged | Sopra Newell & Budge |
| Hewlett-Packard Ltd | Steria |
| Ian Brown | The Stationery Office |
| Information Risk Management PLC | TSO Ireland |
| Intuit | UUJ |
| IRRV | The Whitehall and Industry Group |
| Goods | |
| ARCO | PlanNet 21 Communications |
| City Comm | Sinclair Voicenet |
| Excite Promotional Merchandise | Workwear |
| NI Hospice | |

PERCENTAGE OF COMPANIES FROM THE SME OR SOCIAL ECONOMY SECTOR:

| | |
|----------|-----|
| Works | 60% |
| Services | 66% |
| Goods | 57% |

These figures are based on information provided by the companies themselves.

HR Connect

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many complaints have been received by (i) HR Connect; and (ii) public sector employers, in relation to the activities of HR Connect, broken down by Department and agency. (AQW 7440/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The total number of complaints received by HRConnect since November 2007 is 3838. The attached table provides details broken down by employing Department/Agency/organisation.

The HRConnect complaints process requires employees to raise complaints directly with HRConnect. The Department of Finance and

Personnel does not hold information about HRConnect complaints made directly to other public sector employers.

Please see Table 1 on opposite page.

Civil Service

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if (i) a sum of approximately £100 million has been ring fenced from Treasury to address the back pay issue for lower grade Civil Servants following an industrial tribunal judgement in favour of an equal pay claim lodged by NIPSA; and (ii) will he ensure that grades AA to EO2 in the Civil Service will have parity with comparable staff in I.T. and technical grades, when back pay is awarded. (AQW 7476/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As a result negotiations with the Prime Minister in November 2008, the Executive secured access to £100m to address a range of issues with public expenditure implications, one of which was equal pay.

Officials in the Department of Finance and Personnel are currently in discussion with NIPSA in an effort to establish as clearly as possible the parameters within which a negotiated settlement might be reached so that I, in conjunction with my Ministerial colleagues in the Executive, can consider how the matter should be taken forward.

I am determined that any unlawful inequalities in pay in the NICS, should be put right.

Civil Service

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) when he expects the review of technical grade Civil Servants to be completed; and (ii) is he aware of the impact on the AA to EO2 grade personnel that the delay in resolving their back pay is having, especially during the current economic climate. (AQW 7480/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The review of technical grades is expected to take around 3 months once the analysts commence their work, with the cooperation of both the unions and staff. I am conscious of the intense interest among Civil Service staff regarding resolution of this issue, but in view of its complexity and also the very significant implications for public expenditure in Northern Ireland, it is important that we deal with it properly.

TABLE 1: TO SHOW BY PARTICIPANT THE NUMBER OF COMPLAINTS RECEIVED BY HRCONNECT FROM NOVEMBER 2007 UP TO AND INCLUDING APRIL 2009

| Number of Complaints Received By Month By Participant | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|------|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|------|-----|------|---------------------|
| Name of Participant | 2007 | | | 2008 | | | | | | | | | | | | 2009 | | | | Total by Department |
| | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | | |
| External Applicants | | | | | | | | | | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 9 | 0 | 1 | 7 | 12 | 35 | |
| Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute | | | | | | | | | | 1 | | 3 | 11 | 9 | 25 | 49 | 77 | 31 | 206 | |
| Northern Ireland Office | | | | | | | | | | | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 125 | 56 | 192 | |
| NI Ombudsman | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | | | | | 1 | |
| NI Policing Board | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | | 1 | 11 | | | 13 | |
| Department of Agriculture and Rural Development | | | | 1 | | 2 | | 4 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 7 | 19 | 13 | 48 | 96 | 186 | 89 | 472 | |
| Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure | | | | | 1 | | | 1 | 2 | | | | 1 | 4 | 6 | 11 | 12 | 4 | 42 | |
| Public Records Office NI | | | | | | | | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | |
| Department of Education | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 2 | 3 | 8 | 5 | 15 | 36 | |
| Department for Employment and Learning | | | | | 1 | | | 1 | | 1 | | | 2 | 4 | 6 | 22 | 41 | 15 | 93 | |
| Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment | | 2 | | | | | | 1 | 4 | 2 | | 4 | 4 | 7 | 17 | 17 | 63 | 39 | 160 | |
| Health and Safety Executive NI | | | | | | | | | | 1 | | | | | | | | | 1 | |
| Department of Finance and Personnel | 1 | | | | 1 | | | 3 | | 1 | | 7 | 10 | 17 | 51 | 64 | 137 | 48 | 340 | |
| Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister | | | 2 | | | | | 4 | 5 | 9 | 1 | 4 | 12 | 6 | 12 | 12 | 15 | 18 | 100 | |
| Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety | | | | 3 | | 1 | | 2 | 3 | 8 | | 4 | 8 | 4 | 31 | 33 | 65 | 44 | 206 | |
| Department of the Environment | | | | 1 | 4 | 1 | | | | 1 | | 6 | 7 | 23 | 81 | 93 | 89 | 58 | 364 | |
| Driver and Vehicle Agency | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 0 | |
| Planning Service | | | - | | | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | |
| Environment and Heritage Service/ now known as NI Environment Agency | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | 1 | |
| Department for Regional Development | | | | | | | | 2 | 4 | | 2 | 5 | 19 | 12 | 59 | 66 | 72 | 44 | 285 | |
| Department for Social Development | | | | 2 | | 2 | | 4 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 12 | 13 | 20 | 53 | 79 | 125 | 62 | 379 | |
| Child Maintenance Enforcement Division | 1 | | | | | | | 1 | 1 | 6 | 1 | 11 | 21 | 32 | 68 | 65 | 72 | 43 | 322 | |
| Social Security Agency | | | | 3 | | 1 | 1 | 5 | 1 | 1 | | 17 | 30 | 35 | 91 | 152 | 183 | 68 | 588 | |
| Total by Month | 2 | 2 | 2 | 11 | 7 | 8 | 1 | 29 | 24 | 37 | 13 | 84 | 162 | 200 | 559 | 779 | 1284 | 634 | 3838 | |

Civil Service

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when will the Civil Servants involved in the equal pay claim receive their back pay. (AQW 7513/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As discussions with NIPSA are on-going and the equal pay claims already lodged are now the subject of legal processes in the Industrial Tribunal, I am unable to provide any further specific details at present as regards when this matter will be resolved. However, I am keen that the matter is brought to a conclusion as quickly as possible.

Civil Service

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if, he has ring fenced, within his budget, the financial settlement required for Civil Servants' equal pay claim. (AQW 7514/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Officials in the Department of Finance and Personnel are currently in discussion with NIPSA in an effort to establish as clearly as possible the parameters within which a negotiated settlement might be reached so that I, in conjunction with my Ministerial colleagues in the Executive, can consider how the matter should be taken forward. It is only when that process is completed, that I will be in a position to determine the nature of any financial settlement that might be required to resolve this matter.

Office Rent

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel under what circumstances the Civil Service would pay office rent that was significantly above market rental levels. (AQW 7523/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: All Civil Service office procurement decisions whether at market rental levels or higher, require a business case to ensure value for money.

Domestic Ratepayers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, since the introduction of capital value in the rating system, what percentage of properties have witnessed an increase in rates payable in (i) Portaferry; (ii) Ards Borough Council area; and (iii) Northern Ireland. (AQW 7603/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is not possible to say exactly what percentage of domestic ratepayers in these areas experienced an increase or decrease in rates payable following the introduction of the capital value system.

Domestic Ratepayers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, since the introduction of capital value in the rating system, what percentage of properties have witnessed a decrease in rates payable in (i) Portaferry; (ii) Ards Borough Council area; and (iii) Northern Ireland. (AQW 7604/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is not possible to say exactly what percentage of domestic ratepayers in these areas experienced an increase or decrease in rates payable following the introduction of the capital value system.

Foetal Alcohol Syndrome

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is the number of fatalities caused by Foetal Alcohol Syndrome in the past two years. (AQW 7641/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Foetal alcohol syndrome can often be difficult to diagnose, both at birth and later on in life, as it can be difficult to isolate the effects of the syndrome from other factors, particularly

those relating to general maternal health during pregnancy and other inequalities that the mother and child may have experienced in the years following the birth.

In Northern Ireland in the years 2007 and 2008^P there were no deaths registered where foetal alcohol syndrome^I was listed as a cause of death or where foetal alcohol syndrome was mentioned on the death certificate.

^I International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision code Q86.0.

^P Provisional data.

Departmental Land

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if, in light of the current economic crisis, and with rising fuel and food prices, he has any plans to release departmental land for the use of local communities to grow affordable food and make local food more sustainable. (AQW 7646/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The department does not have any plans to release departmental land for the purposes you have outlined.

Civil Service

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in relation to the Civil Service Equal Pay issue, to detail (i) the position of the Minister and the Executive; (ii) recent contacts with, and representations to, Trade Union; (iii) recent contacts with, and representations to, the Treasury in Whitehall; (iv) a breakdown of the obstacles preventing an immediate resolution; and (iv) the way ahead. (AQW 7664/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I met with representatives of the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance NIPSA on 7 May to discuss the equal pay claims in respect of female members of the NICS. The meeting provided me with the opportunity to hear at first hand the issues of concern to NIPSA and to assure them of my commitment to resolving the Civil Service equal pay issue, if possible, through a negotiated settlement and without the need for litigation.

I have had no further contacts with the Treasury on the matter of NICS Equal Pay since November 2008. However, I do not rule out further discussions with the Chief Secretary on this issue, should that prove necessary.

I have instructed my officials to engage with NIPSA in order to establish the parameters within which a negotiated settlement might be reached so that I, in conjunction with my Ministerial colleagues in the Executive, can consider how the matter should be taken forward. A review of Technical Grades across NI Departments is a necessary part of that process.

However, in parallel with this work, Departments will also be required to respond in due course to equal pay claims that have been lodged with the Industrial Tribunal.

Civil Service

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in relation to the Civil Service Equal Pay issue, (i) to comment on complaints raised by trade union representatives and constituents that the his declared commitment to serious negotiations is being frustrated by the actions of officials in senior Civil Service management; and (ii) to confirm a commitment by his Department to the urgent resolution of this issue through meaningful negotiations. (AQW 7665/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have instructed my officials to work intensively with NIPSA in order to establish the parameters within which a negotiated settlement might be reached so that I, in conjunction with my Ministerial colleagues in the Executive, can consider how the matter should be taken forward. The review of TG grades that is now to be taken forward as a matter of urgency, is a necessary part of that work but it in no way prevents the current discussions between Civil Service management and NIPSA from continuing, on a without prejudice basis. I regard it as essential that this process continues to move forward with the aim of securing an early resolution to the issue.

I met with representatives of the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance on 7 May and assured them of my commitment to resolving the Civil Service equal pay issue, if possible, through a negotiated settlement and without the need for litigation.

Credit Cards

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) how many credit cards have been issued to his Department's staff for work purposes; and (ii) in relation to punitive bank charges on these cards, (a) how many has there been; (b) the total cost of the charges; and (c) the reasons for the charges, in each of the last five years. (AQW 7667/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There is one credit card account currently held by the Department of Finance and Personnel, and there are 2 cards issued on it to officials from the DFP Minister's Office.

In the previous 5 years this is the only account that the Department has operated, with a maximum of 2 cards issued on it at any time.

There have been no punitive bank charges incurred on this account as monthly balances on this account are paid by direct debit to avoid the chance of interest being accumulated.

Alcohol-Related Deaths

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) the number of alcohol-related deaths; and (ii) the number per 100,000 of the population, for each year since 1991. (AQW 7675/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The attached table gives the number of alcohol-related deaths registered in Northern Ireland and the number of alcohol-related deaths per 100,000 of the population by year, 1991 to 2008.

1 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. The Ninth Revision codes used for alcohol related deaths are 291, 303, 305.0, 425.5, 571 and E860.

2 The rate for 2008 is calculated using 2008 projected population. The 2008 mid-year population estimates will be published in July 2009.

P 2008 data is provisional

TABLE: NUMBER OF ALCOHOL RELATED DEATHS REGISTERED IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE NUMBER OF ALCOHOL RELATED DEATHS PER 100,000 OF THE POPULATION, 1991 – 2008P.

| Registration Year | Number of alcohol related deaths | Rate per 100,000 Population |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1991 | 105 | 6.5 |
| 1992 | 95 | 5.9 |
| 1993 | 96 | 5.9 |
| 1994 | 118 | 7.2 |
| 1995 | 120 | 7.3 |
| 1996 | 141 | 8.5 |
| 1997 | 152 | 9.1 |
| 1998 | 158 | 9.4 |
| 1999 | 174 | 10.4 |
| 2000 | 190 | 11.3 |
| 2001 | 206 | 12.2 |
| 2002 | 238 | 14.0 |
| 2003 | 214 | 12.6 |
| 2004 | 255 | 14.9 |
| 2005 | 246 | 14.3 |

| Registration Year | Number of alcohol related deaths | Rate per 100,000 Population |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 2006 | 248 | 14.2 |
| 2007 | 283 | 16.1 |
| 2008P | 276 | 15.6 |

Departmental Land

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when the most recent audit of departmental land was undertaken; and how much unused land the Department currently holds. (AQW 7733/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department carried out a review of its buildings and land in December 2008. The Department does not hold any unused land.

Equal Pay Claim

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in relation to the Civil Service equal pay claim and the decision to conduct a review of TG1 and TG 2 grades, (i) when the review will be completed; (ii) how many staff are affected; (iii) when payments will be made to staff; and (iv) will the £100 million received from Treasury to facilitate a settlement, and any interest accrued, be allocated to the Civil Servants concerned. (AQW 7760/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Arrangements are well underway to conduct the review of TG staff with the aim of completing the work by the end of the summer. A sample of between 100 and 150 of posts in the relevant grades will be examined as part of the review. It is still too early to say when this matter will be resolved as discussions with the Trade Union are on-going in order to establish whether a negotiated settlement is possible. No interest will accrue in respect of the £100 million facility I negotiated with the Prime

Minister in late 2008, to address the cost pressures faced by the Executive.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Patients Discharged from Hospital

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what duty of care GPs have to elderly or seriously ill patients discharged from hospital. (AQW 7452/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The Health and Social Care Board contracts GP practices, under the terms of the new General Medical Service Contract (GMS), to provide essential services required for the management of their patients and to deliver those services in a manner determined by the practice in discussion with the patient. A GP must provide appropriate ongoing treatment and care, taking into account the specific needs of the registered patients. The GP is also required to provide advice in connection with the patient's health, including relevant health promotion advice. In addition, if appropriate, the GP is required to liaise with other health care professionals involved in the patient's treatment and care and, if necessary, refer the patient for any other health or social services.

Patients Discharged from Hospital

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what continuity of care is provided for patients following their discharge from hospital. (AQW 7453/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and Social Care Trusts are required to have arrangements in place for the discharge of patients in consultation and collaboration with appropriate hospital and community personnel, and to ensure that these are fully integrated as necessary with community-based

assessment and care management arrangements. Trusts are required to ensure that there is clarity with regard to the roles and responsibilities of all professionals involved in discharge arrangements so that timely intervention is provided in accordance with the patient's assessed need.

The level of care provided following discharge from acute hospital care will depend on the individual patient's assessed needs.

Integrated Clinical Assessment and Treatment Services

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what ICAT(Integrated Clinical Assessment and Treatment Services) does. (AQW 7503/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Integrated Clinical Assessment and Treatment Services (ICATS) are provided by multi-disciplinary teams of health service professionals, including GPs with special interests, specialist nurses and other allied health professionals. ICATS are provided in a variety of primary and secondary care settings and include assessment, treatment, diagnostic and advisory services for patients referred to the service.

ICATS ensures that patients are referred to the most appropriate next step in a defined care pathway. Patients assessed as needing to see a hospital consultant will do so after having had all the necessary diagnostic tests completed.

I am advised that five GPs within the South Eastern Health and Social Services Trust area are taking part in ICATS.

The ICATS service commenced in December 2006, initially dealing only with orthopaedics. The present service covers orthopaedics, ENT, ophthalmology, dermatology, urology and cardiology.

Substantial investment has been available to Boards for the development and implementation of ICATS services. I allocated £2m to support the initial implementation of ICATS in 2006/07 and have increased this allocation to £9m recurrently from 2007/08.

Family Support Workers

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children currently receive assistance from family support workers in the North Down constituency. (AQW 7544/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As at 11 May 2009, 78 children in the North Down constituency currently receive assistance from family support workers.

Comprehensive Estates Strategy

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will require the Southern Health and Social Care Trust to produce a comprehensive estates strategy for the St Luke's site, in consultation with Armagh City and District Council. (AQW 7557/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am currently considering the Southern HSC Trust's efficiency proposals, which involve the relocation of some services currently provided on the St Luke's hospital site.

The Southern HSC Trust has advised, subject to my decisions on the their proposals and the future of the St Luke's hospital site, that they will work with local stakeholders, including Armagh City and District Council, to develop a strategic plan for the development of the St Luke's / Longstone site.

Service Delivery

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he can ensure that public bodies within his Department consider the impact on the social and economic well-being of the community, when developing proposals for service delivery. (AQW 7559/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department and its related bodies have arrangements in place to ensure appropriate equality impact assessment of proposals for service delivery, in line with the provisions of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act. This includes the assessment of the extent to which policies and services will have a positive impact on the wellbeing of people. My overriding priority is to improve the health and social well-being of the people of Northern Ireland and reduce health inequalities, so that every member of society can achieve their full potential.

Health Services in Armagh City

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the consultation on the proposed future for health services in Armagh City and District Council area, if he is aware of the concerns about the manner in which the consultation was conducted, the quality of the information published by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, and the level of consideration given to the consultation responses. (AQW 7560/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Concerns have been expressed to me by Council and Assembly representatives for the Armagh area. As with all proposals, I will have the final say and I have not made a decision on those that pertain to Armagh hospitals yet.

Closure of Mullinure Hospital

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he can give assurances to stakeholders in Armagh City and District unconvinced by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust that the closure of Mullinure hospital is in the interests of the patients that the hospital will not be closed on purely financial grounds and that patients will be put first. (AQW 7561/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Southern HSC Trust propose that Mullinure will no longer provide non acute inpatient beds it will become a local centre for specialist services for older people and will therefore continue to provide a very valuable resource in supporting the needs of older people in the Armagh area. It is also important to bear in mind that no final decision has been made.

Nut Allergies

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what contact he has had with his counterparts in Westminster and medical staff at Cambridge in relation to the breakthrough addressing nut allergies. (AQW 7567/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Medical advisers in my Department and local allergy specialists are aware of the findings published in the Allergy journal in February 2009. Whilst the preliminary findings are encouraging, the study is still at an early stage and will require further clinical studies before a full evaluation can be made. The research team has emphasised that the treatment should not yet be tried outside of clinical trials.

Cerebral Palsy

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the support services available for parents of children with Cerebral Palsy. (AQW 7572/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is a wide range of support services available to parents of children with Cerebral Palsy, including social workers, Allied Health Professionals working in multidisciplinary teams, Community Children's Nurses, as well as family outreach support. Parents may also avail of Direct Payments which increase choice and promote independence and provide more flexible arrangements than may otherwise be possible for the service user, parents and carer. Parents can avail of Respite Care, which includes domiciliary care, short breaks and residential care. By 2011 an additional 200 packages of respite care will be provided for children and adults with a physical and/or sensory disability, including those

with Cerebral Palsy. Furthermore, in February 2009, I announced an investment of £9m over three years to improve community services and support for children with complex physical needs and their families.

Cerebral Palsy

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps his Department is taking to improve the quality of life for children who have Cerebral Palsy. (AQW 7573/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am committed to improving the lives of all children and young people with disabilities, including those with Cerebral Palsy. My Department is currently developing a draft Physical and Sensory Disability Strategy, which will consider the needs of adults and children with disabilities, including those children with Cerebral Palsy. The emphasis of the strategy, which will be ready for consultation by the end of 2009, will be to help those with a physical and/or sensory disability to lead as full and inclusive lives as possible in society.

Mobile Phone Base Stations

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many people have died from cancer during the last five years; (ii) if proximity to mobile base phone stations was a factor in any of these deaths; and (iii) what measures are being taken by his Department to monitor the proximity of mobile phone base stations in the diagnosis of new cancer cases. (AQW 7594/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of cancer deaths¹ in the last five years² is presented in the table below.

| Registration Year | Number of Deaths |
|-------------------|------------------|
| 2004 | 3,757 |
| 2005 | 3,735 |
| 2006 | 3,848 |
| 2007 | 3,870 |
| 2008 | 3,971 |

There is no evidence available of a direct causal relationship between mobile phone masts and cancer deaths. The Northern Ireland Cancer Registry (NICR), funded by my Department, has responsibility to monitor the incidence and mortality of cancer in Northern Ireland, and investigate any potential cancer clusters around mobile phone masts. My Department also contributes to the funding of the UK Mobile Telecommunications and Health Research (MTHR) programme which was set up in 2001. To date, neither the work of NICR nor the MTHR programme has provided any evidence that proximity to telecommunication masts increases the risk of cancer.

Palliative Care

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the provision of palliative care currently provided at South Tyrone Area Hospital, and if there are any plans to have this expanded. (AQW 7622/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Patients with palliative care needs at the South Tyrone Hospital are supported by a multidisciplinary team, consisting of doctors, nurses and allied health professionals. Patients also have access to a weekly outpatient clinic, led by a palliative care consultant.

In addition, there are two Macmillan specialist nurses working in the Armagh and Dungannon area, providing domiciliary care to patients with a cancer diagnosis. The Southern Health and Social Care Trust is currently

¹ Cancer Deaths have been defined using ICD10 codes C00-C97

² Data for 2008 remains provisional until the publication of the 2008 Annual Report of the Registrar General due to be released in late 2009

working with the Southern Area Hospice to develop an additional palliative care specialist nurse post to work in this area, as well as establishing a day therapy unit on the hospital site.

Foetal Alcohol Syndrome

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the number of diagnosed cases of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome is in the last two years. (AQW 7624/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available.

Foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) is a difficult condition to diagnose accurately because of the wide range of symptoms with which it can present. These signs and symptoms can be indicative of other conditions such as behavioural problems. In addition there are also difficulties associated with ascertaining or establishing the mother's alcohol intake before and during pregnancy.

Departmental Land

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if, in light of the current economic crisis, and with rising fuel and food prices, he has any plans to release departmental land for the use of local communities to grow affordable food and make local food more sustainable. (AQW 7647/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I currently have no plans to release departmental land for the use of local communities to grow affordable food and make local food more sustainable.

Current policy is that any surplus land will be sold at the best price that can reasonably be obtained. These sales proceeds are then re-invested in my Department's capital programme.

Victimisation

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what guarantee can he give that nurses and medical staff who report patient welfare issues will not suffer victimisation. (AQW 7659/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and Social Care staff who raise concerns responsibly and reasonably are given statutory protection against victimisation under the Public Interest Disclosure (Northern Ireland) Order 1998.

Royal Victoria Hospital

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 7331/09, to confirm that the Royal Victoria Hospital is not exempt from inspection by the Belfast City Council Health and Environmental Services Department. (AQW 7722/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Royal Victoria Hospital is not exempt from inspection by the Belfast City Council Environmental Health Department.

Medical Students

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, what arrangements are in place for prospective medical students to engage in work shadowing in hospitals, as a number of university medical facilities have this as a prerequisite for entrance. (AQW 7821/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The only Medical School in Northern Ireland, the Queens University of Belfast, does not require applicants to undertake work shadowing experience in a clinical environment prior to admission to study medicine, therefore no arrangements are required.

DEPARTMENT FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Safety Procedures on Trains

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development what additional safety procedures have been implemented following the serious safety breach on a train on the Larne line on 5 February 2009. (AQW 7276/09)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): The door mechanism of the Class 80 trains is safe if operated according to proper procedures. The mechanism has been approved for use by HM Railway Inspectorate. The incident on 5 February occurred because staff failed to implement the correct procedures properly. Translink has confirmed that all relevant rail staff have been briefed again on the correct procedure for the dispatch of trains from stations. It further advises that staff performance will continue to be monitored.

Maintenance of Trains

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development how much money has been spent on maintenance of trains used on the Larne Line, and how this compares with other trains on the NIR network. (AQW 7446/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink have provided me with the following information regarding the maintenance cost of the Larne line trains compared to the maintenance cost of trains on the other local lines.

| 2006/2007 | Total Train Maintenance Cost | Cost per train mile |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|
| Larne Line (Class 450) | £2,102,544 | £4.39 |
| Other local lines (Class 3000) | £3,081,406 | £1.78 |
| 2007/2008 | | |
| Larne line (Class 450) | £1,854,630 | £3.87 |
| Other local lines (Class 3000) | £3,324,815 | £1.66 |
| 2008/2009 | | |
| Larne line (Class 450) | £2,154,194 | £4.50 |
| Other local lines (Class 3000) | £3,643,294 | £1.80 |

Train maintenance costs include all labour and materials for heavy and running maintenance plus overhaul work. Consequently, maintenance costs for the older Class 450 stock are higher than the still relatively young Class 3000's.

Maintenance of Trains

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development how much money has been spent on trains, lines and stations in East Antrim over the last 3 years, and how this compares with other areas. (AQW 7447/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink have provided me with the following information regarding the maintenance cost of the Larne line trains compared to the maintenance cost of trains on the other local lines over the last three years.

| 2006/2007 | Total Train Maintenance Cost | Cost per train mile |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|
| Larne Line (Class 450) | £2,102,544 | £4.39 |
| Other local lines (Class 3000) | £3,081,406 | £1.78 |
| 2007/2008 | | |
| Larne line (Class 450) | £1,854,630 | £3.87 |
| Other local lines (Class 3000) | £3,324,815 | £1.66 |

| 2006/2007 | Total Train Maintenance Cost | Cost per train mile |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|
| 2008/2009 | | |
| Larne line (Class 450) | £2,154,194 | £4.50 |
| Other local lines (Class 3000) | £3,643,294 | £1.80 |

Train maintenance costs include all labour and materials for heavy and running maintenance plus overhaul work. Consequently, maintenance costs for the older Class 450 stock are higher than the still relatively young Class 3000's.

Capital

Translink have also provided me with the following information regarding capital expenditure on lines and stations in East Antrim.

| Project Name | 2006/07 | 2007/08 | 2008/09 | 2009/10 (Projected Spend) |
|--|----------------|-----------------|-------------------|------------------------------|
| Magheramorne Passing Loop | | | £196 | £416,150 |
| UB424 Carrickfergus- Edge Beams | | £10,332 | £13,114 | £2,552 |
| Downshire to Whitehead Sea Defence Strengthening - Section 1 | | | £738,037 | £181,563 |
| Downshire to Whitehead Sea Defence Strengthening - Section 3 | | £420,385 | £178,441 | |
| Track Condition Retention Programme - Larne Line | | | £334,737 | £145,250 |
| Carrickfergus P&R | | £91,292 | | |
| Whiteabbey P&R | £16,301 | £6,074 | £13,537 | £377,001 |
| Greenisland P&R | | | £150,539 | |
| Jordanstown Halt P&R | £10,881 | £2,117 | £22,983 | |
| Whitehead P&R | £7,473 | £2,273 | £111,548 | |
| Magheramorne Train Radio Signal Booster | | | £24,138 | |
| Bleachgreen to Whitehead Relay | £62,658 | | | |
| Total | £97,313 | £532,473 | £1,587,270 | £1,122,516 |

PROJECTS WHICH INCLUDE EXPENDITURE IN EAST ANTRIM

| | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| New Trains Two | | | £16,500,000 | £12,500,000 |
| Train Protection and Warning System | £2,343,510 | £17,840 | | |
| Total Capital Outturn for Rail | £10,633,070 | £27,377,790 | £36,050,046 | £36,100,000 |

In relation to comparison with other areas, assuming that the query relates to other constituencies, there was insufficient time available to extract relevant data. However, the table above also includes total capital expenditure on railways.

Roads Service

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the Roads Service policy on the provision of hitching posts for horses in rural areas. (AQW 7459/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it has no policy for the provision of hitching posts for horses in rural areas.

Aviation Inquiry

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development if any evidence has been provided to the House of Commons Transport Select Committee in relation to its current inquiry into aviation. (AQW 7460/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department has not been asked by the Transport Select Committee to submit evidence nor has it offered any evidence to this inquiry, which relates mainly to aviation matters that are not the responsibility of the devolved administration.

Road Realignment Measures

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on timescales for the introduction of road realignment measures across the Craigantlet Hills. (AQW 7462/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it is currently assessing a number of options to improve safety and the flow of traffic in the Craigantlet Hills area. Once this assessment is completed and an optimum layout has been identified, detailed design will be undertaken, which will allow the statutory processes to commence. However, taking into account the timescale required to develop and complete these procedures, it is unlikely that improvement works could commence before 2011.

I should further advise that the inclusion of any potential scheme for the Craigantlet Hills area, on a future works programme, would be subject to the various competing priorities, as well as the availability of the necessary land and finance.

Roads Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what compensation is available to commercial premises for loss of trade as a result of disruption caused by the work of Roads Service. (AQW 7469/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Compensation, subject to one exceptional situation, is not ordinarily payable to the owners of commercial premises for loss of trade due to disruption by the works of Roads Service or, indeed, other utilities or parties or their contractors. This loss is in law referred to as "economic loss". The general legal principle is that there is no entitlement to economic loss.

The exception to the general legal principle occurs where it is established that economic loss has arisen out of physical damage caused to the commercial premises in the course of the works and where such loss is capable of being quantified and proved in accordance with usual legal requirements.

Every claim for loss of trade is considered on its own facts and merits against these established legal principles.

Roads Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what notification is given by Roads Service to commercial premises when work is about to commence on the road on which they are situated. (AQW 7471/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service arrangements for notifying commercial premises will vary according to the nature of works being completed. Where a roads scheme will cause traffic disruption, or inconvenience is expected to be prolonged, notification is provided by means of:

- a letter drop to all nearby properties and residents. This will include details of the extent and timescale of the disruption and a contact point for further information;
- public notice in the local press; and
- through the Roads Service website.

When completing routine short term maintenance work, such as gully emptying and patching and the disruption to traffic is expected to be minimal, no notification is generally provided.

Public Procurement Contracts

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the companies that were successful in securing public procurement contracts in works, services and goods through his Department, in the last two years and the percentage of these that were from the SME or the Social Economy sectors. (AQW 7484/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I attach a list of companies that were successful in securing public procurement contracts in works, services and goods through my Department in the period 1 April 2007 to 31 March 2009. The information on status has largely been provided by the companies themselves and has not been verified by the Department. It has not been possible to ascertain the status of all the companies involved.

Contracts were let to 122 companies. From the information available, I can confirm that (96) 79% were from the Small and Medium Enterprise sector and (2) 2% were from the Social Economy Sector.

| Company | SME | Social Economy Sector |
|---|---------|-----------------------|
| Abco Divers Ltd | ✓ | |
| Advance Coaching | ✓ | |
| Anderson Fuels | ✓ | |
| Atkins | NEITHER | |
| Balfour J & Sons Ltd | ✓ | |
| Ballentine J&T (Sales) Ltd | ✓ | |
| BC Plant Ltd | ✓ | |
| BDO Stoy Hayward | ✓ | |
| Belfast & Down Oil Supplies | ✓ | |
| Belfast City Council | NEITHER | |
| Blyth Bridges Marine Consultants Ltd | ✓ | |
| Booz Allen & Hamilton Ltd | UNKNOWN | |
| Bradley Patrick Ltd | ✓ | |
| BRC Partnership | ✓ | |
| Bridge Accessible Transport Enterprises | | ✓ |
| British Telecom | NEITHER | |
| Castle catering | ✓ | |
| Clearview Traffic Group | ✓ | |
| Colleen Bros Quarries Ltd | ✓ | |
| Commercial Graphics, Greenway Industrial Estate | ✓ | |
| Conor McClean | ✓ | |
| CPCR Ltd | ✓ | |
| Crozier W J | ✓ | |
| Cybertrust | NEITHER | |
| David Robinson Associates | UNKNOWN | |
| Disability Action Tradable Services | | ✓ |
| Driver Hire Ltd/Driver Hire Foil | ✓ | |
| E J Magee | ✓ | |

| Company | SME | Social Economy Sector |
|----------------------------------|---------|-----------------------|
| Edentrillick Quarries Ltd | ✓ | |
| Engineering Distributors | ✓ | |
| Entec (UK) Ltd | NEITHER | |
| EOS Systems | ✓ | |
| Eward J. Magee | ✓ | |
| Excite Exhibition and Display | ✓ | |
| Experian Ltd | NEITHER | |
| Fire IMC | ✓ | |
| Fox Building & Engineering Ltd | ✓ | |
| FP McCann | NEITHER | |
| Francis Dunn | ✓ | |
| Fugro-BKS Ltd | ✓ | |
| GB Electrics | ✓ | |
| Gibson (Banbridge) Ltd | ✓ | |
| Goldblatt McGuigan | ✓ | |
| Gordons Electrical Supplies | ✓ | |
| GPS Colour Graphics | ✓ | |
| Graham & Heslip | ✓ | |
| Herbert Smith | NEITHER | |
| Hogg R & Sons Ltd | ✓ | |
| Holiday Inn Belfast | NEITHER | |
| Impression Print & Design | ✓ | |
| Impro Printing | ✓ | |
| Inform Communications | ✓ | |
| James Balfour | ✓ | |
| John Graham (Dromore) Ltd | NEITHER | |
| John Hagan Ltd Builders Supplies | ✓ | |
| John Hunter Belfast | ✓ | |
| John McQuillan (Contracts) Ltd | ✓ | |
| Keenan Patrick - Magherafelt | ✓ | |
| Kennedy & Morrison | ✓ | |
| Kennedy Recruitment | ✓ | |
| Kilkeel Steel Products | ✓ | |
| KPL Contracts | ✓ | |
| KPMG | ✓ | |
| Lagan Construction (Ltd) | NEITHER | |

| Company | SME | Social Economy Sector |
|------------------------------------|---------|-----------------------|
| Lagan Ferrovia Agroman | NEITHER | |
| Leica Geosystems Ltd | UNKNOWN | |
| M & P Bradley | ✓ | |
| McCallan Bros Ltd | NEITHER | |
| McClure Watters | UNKNOWN | |
| McLaughlin & Harvey Ltd | NEITHER | |
| MFV Swiftsure Donaghadee | ✓ | |
| Minprint | ✓ | |
| Miskelly Bros Ltd | ✓ | |
| Mitten R J & Sons | ✓ | |
| Morrow Group | ✓ | |
| Mrs Maire Young | ✓ | |
| N McMullan & Son | ✓ | |
| Nelsons Boats and Marine Services | ✓ | |
| Neueda | ✓ | |
| NI Fish Producers Organisation Ltd | ✓ | |
| Nicholson & Bass, Newtownabbey | ✓ | |
| Noilin Nic Bhloscaidh | ✓ | |
| Northern Whig | ✓ | |
| Northstone NI Ltd | ✓ | |
| Norwest Holst Ltd | ✓ | |
| Oakdene Services | ✓ | |
| ORICA Blast & Quarry Surveys | ✓ | |
| Oxford Economics | ✓ | |
| Patrick Bradley Ltd | ✓ | |
| Patrick Keenan | ✓ | |
| Pentagon Solutions | ✓ | |
| Pod Print Ltd | ✓ | |
| PriceWaterhouseCoopers | ✓ | |
| Printsol NI Ltd | ✓ | |
| Rathlin Island Ferry Ltd | ✓ | |
| Road Safety Contracts Ltd | ✓ | |
| Rodgers Contracts Ltd | ✓ | |
| Roger Tym & Partners | ✓ | |
| Rubber Stamp Company | ✓ | |

| Company | SME | Social Economy Sector |
|---|---------|-----------------------|
| RW Pierce | ✓ | |
| Salt Sales Co | UNKNOWN | |
| Sam Hutchinson & Co | ✓ | |
| Six West | ✓ | |
| Sky High Technology Ltd | UNKNOWN | |
| Soil Mechanics | ✓ | |
| Sopra Group Ltd | ✓ | |
| SPSS | NEITHER | |
| Sureskills Ltd | ✓ | |
| Symology | ✓ | |
| Tarmac Quarry Products Ltd | UNKNOWN | |
| The TAS Partnership Limited | ✓ | |
| Thorn Lighting Ltd | UNKNOWN | |
| Total Boat Kinnego Marina | ✓ | |
| Tullyraine Quarries Ltd | ✓ | |
| W & G Baird, Antrim | ✓ | |
| W J McCormick & Sons Ltd | ✓ | |
| W McKay & Sons Ltd | ✓ | |
| Watts Group PLC | ✓ | |
| WDM Limited | ✓ | |
| Wells Tyres Batteries Exhausts & Auto Servicing | ✓ | |
| White Mountain Quarries | ✓ | |
| Willis | UNKNOWN | |

Bus Stop Signs

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development how many bus stop signs and timetables have been erected in the North Antrim constituency over the past 12 months. (AQW 7489/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Provision of bus stops and timetables is an operational matter for Translink. The table below sets out the number of bus stop signs and timetables that have been erected in the North Antrim Constituency in the last 12 months. It should be noted that these figures include new bus stops and those refurbished due to damage.

| Location | Standard bus stop flag | Enhanced bus stop flag | Timetable |
|-------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------|
| Ballymena | 120 | 114 | 50 |
| Ballycastle | 20 | | 5 |
| Ballymoney | 10 | | 4 |
| Dunloy | 8 | | 4 |

| Location | Standard bus stop flag | Enhanced bus stop flag | Timetable |
|--------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------|
| Rasharkin | 8 | 4 | |
| Cushendall | 4 | 2 | |
| Cushendun | | 2 | 2 |
| Ahoghill | 10 | | 2 |
| Total | 180 | 122 | 67 |

Note: A standard bus stop has the normal service flag. An enhanced flag has the stop name and route number.

Translink

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of accidents involving Translink buses in the last five years, broken down by bus type. (AQW 7509/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink has informed me that it does not hold the information in the form requested. The table below shows the number of accidents involving Translink buses in each of the last five financial years.

BUS ACCIDENTS 04/05 - 08/09

| Year | Ulsterbus | Citybus/Metro | Total |
|--------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|
| 2004/05 | 898 | 474 | 1372 |
| 2005/06 | 834 | 516 | 1350 |
| 2006/07 | 1076 | 516 | 1592 |
| 2007/08 | 966 | 583 | 1549 |
| 2008/09 | 906 | 591 | 1497 |
| Total | 4680 | 2680 | 7360 |

Senior Civil Servant Bonuses

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development how much was paid in bonuses to senior Civil Servants in his Department in (i) 2003/04; (ii) 2004/05; (iii) 2005/06; (iv) 2006/07; and (v) 2007/08. (AQW 7537/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The total amount paid during each of the years in question was as follows:

| | |
|---------|---------|
| 2003/04 | £47,500 |
| 2004/05 | £72,250 |
| 2005/06 | £91,000 |
| 2006/07 | £87,000 |
| 2007/08 | £90,250 |

There is widespread public anger at the large bonuses being paid to public servants who are already in receipt of substantial incomes. As Minister, I share this concern and want a review to be undertaken on this matter.

Vehicles Damaged by Potholes

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development in relation to vehicles damaged by potholes in the East Londonderry constituency, (i) how many compensation claims have been received by his Department; and (ii) how much money has been paid out in compensation in each of the last five years. (AQW 7554/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Unfortunately, my Department's Central Claims Unit does not hold the information in the format requested. However, Central Claims Unit does maintain a record of compensation claims details for each Roads Service Section Office. The area of the East Londonderry constituency includes all of the Coleraine and Limavady Section Offices plus two Wards which fall within the Derry Section Office area. The following figures show the number of compensation claims received and the amounts of compensation paid by the Central Claims Unit for each of the last five financial years in respect to damage to motor vehicles caused by potholes in the Coleraine and Limavady Section Office areas. Disaggregation of the Derry Section Office figures to isolate the two Wards within the East Londonderry constituency could only be extracted at disproportionate cost.

| | No.of Claims Received | Compensation Paid |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| 2008/2009 | | |
| Coleraine Section Office | 35 | £2,364.02 |
| Limavady Section Office | 3 | £578.20 |
| Total | 38 | £2,942.22 |
| 2007/2008 | | |
| Coleraine Section Office | 26 | £577.98 |
| Limavady Section Office | 5 | £796.39 |
| Total | 31 | £1,374.37 |
| 2006/2007 | | |
| Coleraine Section Office | 22 | £1,456.30 |
| Limavady Section Office | 11 | £238.52 |
| Total | 33 | £1,694.82 |
| 2005/2006 | | |
| Coleraine Section Office | 24 | £3,382.10 |
| Limavady Section Office | 2 | £35.50 |
| Total | 26 | £3,417.60 |
| 2004/2005 | | |
| Coleraine Section Office | 13 | £329.49 |
| Limavady Section Office | 9 | £523.00 |
| Total | 22 | £852.49 |

Speed Limits in East Belfast

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Regional Development if he intends to put in place a restricted speed limit of 20 mph within the Cameronian Drive and surrounding areas of the East Belfast constituency. (AQW 7565/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that 20mph zones are an extension of traffic calming schemes. As such, they are generally implemented in residential areas, where there is an extensive network of streets, and self-enforcing measures are in place to reduce vehicle speeds to approximately 20mph.

Roads Service receives many requests for traffic calming schemes and, as demand greatly exceeds the capacity to supply these measures, all proposals are required to be assessed, scored and prioritised.

An assessment of the Cameronian Drive area has been carried out, as requested by the Member. Unfortunately, this has indicated that it would not be highly placed in relation to other competing schemes, which are already in Roads Service's traffic calming programme. Therefore, Roads Service does not have any plans to provide a 20 mph speed limit in this area, at this time.

Road Calming Measures in East Belfast

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Regional Development if he plans to introduce road calming measures within the Cameronian Drive area of the East Belfast constituency. (AQW 7566/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My department's Roads Service has advised that it receives many requests for traffic calming schemes. As demand greatly exceeds the capacity to supply these measures, all proposals are required to be assessed, scored and prioritised.

An assessment of the Cameronian Drive area has been carried out, as requested by the Member. Unfortunately, this has indicated that it would not be highly placed in relation to other competing schemes, which are already in Roads service's traffic calming programme. Therefore, Roads Service does not have any plans to provide a traffic calming scheme in this area, at this time.

Translink

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the impact of Translink's price increases on the usage of the Larne to Belfast train and bus routes. (AQW 7574/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The average fares increases are 2% for bus travel and 3% for rail.

Under Translink's proposals, cash fares would be increased, but most multi journey ticket prices would remain at present levels. This would provide positive benefits for regular public transport users on the Larne route by encouraging the use of pre-paid tickets, the use of which reduces boarding times and keeps buses running on schedule. Overall Regional Transportation targets for passenger levels are expected to be maintained during 2009/2010.

Bus Stop Signs

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many bus timetables and bus stop signs have been erected in the North Down constituency over the past 12 months. (AQW 7586/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Provision of bus stops and timetables is an operational matter for Translink. The table below sets out the number of bus stop signs and timetables that have been erected in the North Down Constituency in the last 12 months. It should be noted that these figures include new bus stops and those refurbished due to damage.

| Location | Standard bus stop flag | Enhanced bus stop flag | Timetable |
|------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------|
| Bangor | 121 | 217 | 70 |
| Holywood | 8 | 0 | 2 |
| Donaghadee | 5 | 0 | 1 |
| Millisle | 8 | 0 | 2 |

Note: A standard bus stop has the normal service flag. An enhanced flag has the stop name and route number.

Road Junctions

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the 20 busiest road junctions, intersections or roundabouts in terms of traffic volume (not congestion); and (ii) the average traffic flow at these locations on a daily basis. (AQW 7589/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Departments Roads Service has advised that traffic flows at individual road junctions are generally only measured if there is a specific reason to do so. However, as part of the Annual Traffic Census, traffic surveys are carried out on strategic and other specified routes.

The table below details the Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) at the North's 20 busiest routes, or links along a route, in terms of traffic volume, as recorded in the Annual Traffic Census, together with an indication of the key junctions on each route.

| Route No. | Road Number | Road Description | Busiest Links | 24 HR AADT (7 Day) | Major Junctions (Jct) |
|-----------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------|---|
| 1 | M2 | York Street to Dunsilly Jct 1 M22 | Greencastle (Junction 2) – Sandyknowes | 59,520 | York Street/M3 Jct |
| | | | Fortwilliam Interchange – Inbound | 50,430 | Fortwilliam Interchange |
| | | | Fortwilliam Interchange – Outbound | 45,000 | Jct Greencastle / M5 |
| | | | Sandyknowes (Junction 4) – Templepatrick | 42,320 | Jct Sandyknowes / A8(M) |
| | | | Rathbeg (Junction 6) – Templepatrick (Junction 5) | 40,500 | Jct Templepatrick |
| | | | Rathbeg (Junction 6) – Dunsilly M22 (Jct 11) | 35,040 | Jct Rathbeg, Jct M22 |
| 2 | A2 | Belfast to Bangor | Sydenham By-Pass, at Airport | 55,730 | Dee St/M3 Jct, Tillysburn Jct, Ballyrobert Road Jct |
| | | | Hollywood By-Pass, east of Belfast Road | 43,970 | A2 at Seahill Road |
| | | | Belfast - Bangor, at Cultra, east of Folk Museum | 38,020 | |
| | | | Belfast - Bangor, at Springhill | 24,300 | |
| | Derry | | Strand Road | 35,920 | Jct Buncrana Rd, Jct Foyle Embankment |
| | | | Limavady Road | 27,970 | Jct Crescent Link Roundabout, Jct Broad Bridge, Jct Carlisle Road, Jct Duke Street |
| | | | Craigavon Bridge | 25,240 | Jct Culmore Rd Round-about, Jct Strand Road Roundabout |
| | | | Culmore Road | 22,350 | |
| | | | Queen's Quay | 22,230 | Jct Strand Road Round-about, Jct Foyle Embankment |
| | Belfast to Carrickfergus | | Carrickfergus - Belfast | 25,950 | Jct M5, Jct Station Road (B513), Jct Jordanstown Road, Jct Station Rd (B90), Jct Davy's St (B90 at Roundabout). |
| | | | | | |
| 3 | M1 | Broadway to Ballynacor | Blacks Road - Saintfield Road (Junction 6) | 54,100 | Jct Blacks Road, Jct Saintfield Road |
| | | | Broadway - Stockman's Lane | 43,590 | Jct A12 Westlink, Jct Stockmans Lane |
| | | | Lough Road (Junction 10) – (Ballynacor Junction 11) | 35,420 | Jct Moira, Jct Lough Rd, Jct Ballynacor Sprucefield, Jct Blaris (A101) |
| | | | Sprucefield (Junction 7) – Moira (Junction 9) | 35,260 | |

| Route No. | Road Number | Road Description | Busiest Links | 24 HR AADT (7 Day) | Major Junctions (Jct) |
|-----------|-------------|--------------------------|--|--------------------|--|
| 4 | A1 | Belfast to Newry | Lisburn – Hillsborough | 39,510 | Jct Sprucefield, Jct A101 |
| | | | Hillsborough By-Pass, | 30,790 | Jct B77 at Hillsborough |
| | | | Dromore – Banbridge, | 27,280 | Jct B2-Lurgan, Jct A50 at Banbridge |
| | | | Newry By-Pass (Stage 2) | 26,190 | Jct Armagh Road, Jct Dublin Road |
| | | | Lisburn Road, Belfast, at King's Hall | 23,470 | Stockmans Lane/Balmoral Ave Jct |
| | | | Banbridge By-Pass, | 22,160 | Jct A50 at Banbridge |
| 5 | A55 | Outer Ring Road Belfast | Upper Knockbreda Road, Belfast | 39,210 | Jct A24 Saintfield Rd / Upper Galwally |
| | | | Shaws Bridge, Belfast | 31,650 | Jct A55 Malone Road at House of Sport |
| | | | Parkway, Belfast | 22,620 | Jct A20 Upper Newtownards Road, Jct Parkway |
| 6 | A12 | Westlink | Clifton Street, towards M2 | 35,350 | Jct M2/M3/York St, Jct Clifton St |
| | | | Clifton Street, towards M1 | 28,900 | Jct Divis Street, Jct Broadway, M1 |
| 7 | M5 | Belfast to Whiteabbey | Greencastle - Whiteabbey | 32,650 | Jct M2 at Greencastle, Jct A2 Shore Road |
| 8 | A515 | Foyle Bridge Derry | At Foyle Bridge | 31,520 | Jct Roundabout Madamsbank Rd, Jct Culmore Road Roundabout. |
| 9 | A26 | Antrim to Ballymoney | Antrim - Ballymena, North of Dunsilly | 30,950 | Jct M2 at Antrim, Jct M2 at Ballymena Ballykeel Rd |
| | | | Ballymena - Ballymoney, north of M2 | 21,510 | Jct M2 at Ballymena (north) |
| 10 | A24 | Belfast to Carryduff | At Baronscourt | 30,570 | Jct A55 Ring road, Jct A27 Saintfield Rd |
| | | | At Saintfield Road | 27,320 | Jct Carinshill road |
| 11 | A29 | Coleraine | Coleraine Ring Road, | 29,370 | Jct Dunhill Road Roundabout, Jct Newbridge Road |
| | | | Coleraine Ring Road, | 22,250 | Jct Ballycastle Road Roundabout |
| 12 | A3 | Portadown | Northway, Portadown, | 28,340 | Jct Mill Ave, Jct A3 Craigavon |
| 13 | A6 | Dungiven Road Derry | Dungiven Road | 27,760 | Jct A514 Crescent Link |
| | | | Dungiven Road | 26,820 | Jct Shephards Glen roundabout |
| 14 | A501 | Falls Road | Falls Road between Springfield Road and Broadway | 26,170 | Jct A55 Kennedy Way, Jct Whiterock Road, Jct Broadway |
| 15 | A20 | Dundonald to Newtownards | Upper Newtownards Road at Quarry Inn | 23,820 | Jct A20 Kempstone Road, Jct Dunlady Rd |
| 16 | A514 | Crescent Link Derry | Crescent Link at Caw | 23,630 | Jct Glenshane Road Roundabout |
| 17 | B507 | Branch Road Derry | Branch Road at Branch Road Roundabout | 22,300 | Jct Branchroad Roundabout |
| 18 | A5 | Omagh Throughpass | Omagh Throughpass | 21,420 | Jct Tamlaght Road |
| | | | Omagh By-Pass, at footbridge | 21,270 | |
| 19 | A513 | Dunmurry | At Wilmar Road | 21,290 | Jct Princewilliam Road, Jct McKinstry Road |
| 20 | A25 | Newry | Camlough, at Egyptian Arch | 20,900 | Jct Craigmore Way |

Roads Maintenance Projects in Ards

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the road maintenance projects completed in the Ards Peninsula area; and (ii) the amount of money invested in such projects for each of the last five years. (AQW 7592/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: It is assumed that when you refer to road maintenance projects, this relates to road resurfacing schemes.

On this basis, the table below details the expenditure and lists all roads in the Ards Peninsula area which were resurfaced during the last five financial years.

ANNUAL EXPENDITURE ON RESURFACING SCHEMES IN THE ARDS PENINSULA

| Financial Year | Resurfacing Scheme |
|---|--|
| 2008/09 | New Road, Donaghadee |
| | Greyabbey Road, Ballywalter |
| | Bowtown Road (1), Newtownards |
| | Bowtown Road (2), Newtownards |
| | Ballyblack Road East, Newtownards |
| | Portaferry Road, Cloughey |
| | Mountstewart Road, Newtownards |
| | Main Road, Portavogie |
| | Rubane Road, Kircubbin |
| | Kircubbin Road, Cloughey |
| | Grangee Crossroads |
| Total Resurfacing Expenditure 2008/09 - £821,000 | |
| Year | Resurfacing Scheme |
| 2007/08 | A2 Portaferry Road, Cloughey (Watson's Garage – Loughdoo Road) |
| | Ballyphilip Road, Portaferry (Cloughey Road – Ballyblack Road) |
| | Victoria Road, Ballyhalbert (Main Road – The Moatlands) |
| | Springvale Road, Ballywalter (Strand Park – Kircubbin Road) |
| | Greyabbey Road, Ballywalter (At Ballyatwood Road junction) |
| | Bowtown Road, Newtownards (Stanwell Road – 30 MPH Signs) |
| | Bowtown Road, Newtownards (30 MPH Signs – Lougheries Road) |
| | Ballyblack Road East, Newtownards |
| | C254 Finlay's Road, Newtownards |
| | Mountstewart Road, Newtownards (Portaferry Road – McCullough's Corner) |
| Total Resurfacing Expenditure 2007/08 - £997,000 | |
| Year | Resurfacing Scheme |
| 2006/07 | High Street / Victoria Road, Ballyhalbert (Moatlands – Post Office) |
| | Movilla Road, Newtownards |
| | A2 Portaferry Road, Cloughey (Watson's Garage – Loughdoo Road) |
| | Ballyphilip Road, Portaferry (Cloughey Road – Ballyblack Road) |
| | Victoria Road, Ballyhalbert (Main Road – The Moatlands) |
| | Springvale Road, Ballywalter (Strand Park – Kircubbin Road) |

| Financial Year | Resurfacing Scheme |
|---|--|
| Total Resurfacing Expenditure 2006/07 - £572,000 | |
| Year | Resurfacing Scheme |
| 2005/06 | A20 Main Street, Kircubbin (Blackhall Street – Roden Street) |
| | Mountstewart Road, Carrowdore (At McCullough's House) |
| | Bog Road, Portavogie |
| | A48 Newtownards Road, Donaghadee (Bailie Road – Hogstown) |
| | A2 Shore Road, Ballyhalbert (At Caravan Park) |
| | Ballyblack Road East, Newtownards |
| | C253 Killaughey Road, Donaghadee |
| | Movilla Road, Newtownards |
| Total Resurfacing Expenditure 2005/06 - £455,000 | |
| Year | Resurfacing Scheme |
| 2004/05 | Ballywalter Main - Street Stage 1 (Stump Road – The Square) |
| | A20 Main Street, Kircubbin (Blackhall Street – The Green) |
| | Main Street, Greyabbey (Mini Roundabout – School) |
| | Manor Street, Donaghadee |
| | Cloughey Road, Portavogie |
| | A20 Rowreagh Road at Ardkeen (End of Asphalt – 'S' Bends) |
| | A48 Cotton Road, Newtownards |
| | Mountstewart Road, Carrowdore (At McCullough's House) |
| Total Resurfacing Expenditure 2004/05 - £146,000 | |

Roads Maintenance Projects in Ards

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail roads maintenance projects which are currently scheduled for commencement or completion in the Ards Peninsula area. (AQW 7595/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service's budget allocation for the Ards council area is currently being finalised, after which the proposed work programmes can be confirmed. Details of the work programmes will then be presented to the council in the Roads Service Report at the Spring meeting with Ards Borough Council, which is scheduled for the 22 June 2009.

Following this meeting, the Council report will be available to view online at the following web address:

http://www.roadsni.gov.uk/index/publications/publications-council_reports.htm

Crockanboy Road, Greencastle, Omagh

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline what plans his Department has to address the dangerous condition of the Crockanboy Road, Greencastle, Omagh. (AQW 7621/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the Crockanboy Road is maintained in accordance with their Roads Maintenance Standards, and would therefore not consider it to be in a dangerous condition.

I am further advised that three sections of the Crockanboy Road, from Gortin to the Cookstown Road, were substantially reshaped in April 2009 and other minor patching is currently underway in preparation for a future surface dressing scheme.

Crockanboy Road, Greencastle, Omagh

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to give an indicative timeline for commencement and completion of work to improve the condition of the Crockanboy Road, Greencastle, Omagh. (AQW 7623/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: As I advised the Member in my response to his Assembly Question, AQW 7621/09, three sections of the Crockanboy Road from Gortin to the A505, Cookstown Road, were substantially reshaped in April 2009 and other minor patching is currently underway in preparation for a future surface dressing scheme. Roads Service has advised that it is expected that the surface dressing will be finished by the end of July 2009, however, this will be dependent on the weather conditions.

Departmental Land

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development if, in light of the current economic crisis and with rising fuel and food prices, he has any plans to release departmental land for the use of local communities to grow affordable food and make local food more sustainable. (AQW 7704/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that any lands it declares surplus to requirements, must be disposed of in line with guidelines set down by the Department of Finance and Personnel, Land and Property Services (LPS). Therefore any such proposal, in relation to surplus land would require LPS endorsement. However, land being held for future road schemes can, as an interim measure, be let provided the timing of the road scheme permits.

Northern Ireland Water has advised that while it has no plans to release any of its land for the purposes of growing food, it does help sustain farming in the North, by leasing land on a commercial basis to local farmers, for grazing sheep and cattle.

Door to Door Transport Scheme

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development for the number of members of the Door to Door Transport Scheme in (i) Lurgan; (ii) Portadown; and (iii) Banbridge. (AQW 7745/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: On 15 May 2009 there were 80 members of the Door-to-Door Transport scheme in the Lurgan operational area, 104 members in the Portadown operational area, and 61 members in the Banbridge operational area.

M5 Safety Barrier at Greencastle

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 7051/09, in light of previous accidents on the citybound section of the M5, which resulted in fatalities, to explain why no barrier is required to protect vehicles from leaving the carriageway, crossing an unprotected pedestrian and cycle route and facing the water hazard represented by Belfast Lough. (AQW 7758/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I understand that your question has been revised to relate to the "city bound" section of the M5.

My Department's Roads Service has advised that the sections of safety barrier on the M5 Motorway have been provided in accordance with the standards that were applicable, when the work was originally carried out.

While standards may change periodically, they do not normally apply retrospectively. However, this section of motorway would be assessed again, under the appropriate standards, as part of any future planned work or major maintenance in the immediate vicinity.

Background

Detailed briefing regarding safety barriers on the M5 Motorway was provided in response to previous Written Questions (AQW 502/09 and AQW7051/09), from Mr Robinson.

Audio-Visual Information on Buses

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the delay in the pilot of audio-visual information (AV) on buses; if his Department has found the mislaid funding applications and when funding will be made available, in line with the Accessible Transport Strategy, to pilot AV on buses to improve the quality of life of many disabled people. (AQW 7881/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: There has been no delay in the Department's consideration of proposals for an audio-visual pilot on buses nor have any applications for funding been mislaid.

The Accessible Transport Strategy Action Plan for 2007-2009 included a measure to "examine the practicalities of introducing audio visual announcements of travel information on buses." This was to be undertaken by DRD and Translink and was achieved with an original business case being submitted in January 2008.

The Accessible Transport Strategy draft Action Plan for 2009-2012 includes two measures relating to audio visual systems on buses. The first is that Translink would, by April 2009 "submit a revised business case for the introduction of audio and visual announcements of travel information on buses". The second is that my Department's Ports and Public Transport Division would "examine the business case of introducing audio visual announcements of travel information on buses" to be completed by September 2009. This Action Plan is presently out for public consultation.

My Department has now received the revised business case from Translink, which officials are considering at the moment. The funding of any pilot to provide audio-visual information on buses will, of course, be dependent on the necessary resources being available at that time.

Audio-Visual Information on Buses

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department is fully committed to the pilot of audio-visual information on buses as outlined in the Accessible Transport Strategy (ATS); the reasons why the pilot was not undertaken within the ATS 2007 to 2009 workplan; and why his Department appears to have mislaid 3 funding applications submitted by Translink, further delaying the pilot within the ATS 2010 to 2012 workplan. (AQW 7882/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: There has been no delay in the Department's consideration of proposals for an audio-visual pilot on buses nor have any applications for funding been mislaid.

The Accessible Transport Strategy Action (ATS) Plan for 2007-2009 included a measure to "examine the practicalities of introducing audio visual announcements of travel information on buses." This was to be undertaken by DRD and Translink and was achieved with an original business case being submitted in January 2008.

The ATS draft Action Plan for 2009-2012 includes two measures relating to audio visual systems on buses. The first is that Translink would, by April 2009 "submit a revised business case for the introduction of audio and visual announcements of travel information on buses". The second is that my Department's Ports and Public Transport Division would "examine the business case of introducing audio visual announcements of travel information on buses" to be completed by September 2009. This Action Plan is presently out for public consultation.

My Department has now received the revised business case from Translink, which officials are considering at the moment. The funding of any pilot to provide audio-visual information on buses will, of course, be dependent on the necessary resources being available at that time.

DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Housing Benefit Claims in North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) how many properties in the North Down constituency have been found to be unoccupied and resulted in housing benefit claims being terminated; and (ii)

the total number of housing benefit claims that have been terminated as a result of unoccupied properties, since May 2007. (AQW 7473/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The information is not available on a constituency basis. The North Down Constituency comprises the Bangor District Office along with a small part of Newtownards District.

The Housing Executive completed an exercise during 2008, to identify properties which were suspected of being unoccupied. As a result of this exercise the number of housing benefit claims that were terminated from the Bangor and Newtownards District Offices totalled 22 and the number of properties recovered was 11.

Additionally, the Housing Executive's local district offices routinely take action where they consider that properties are tenanted, but not being occupied which regularly result in tenancy terminations without the need for court action (irrespective of whether or not housing benefit is payable). There were a further 12 properties recovered in Bangor, and 30 in Newtownards, through recovery action during 2008/09.

Housing Benefit Claims in Coleraine

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how many people are claiming housing benefit in Coleraine; and (ii) how this compares with a year ago. (AQW 7490/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of people claiming Housing Benefit in Coleraine as at 1 April 2009 was 4,594. The number claiming as at 1 April 2008 was 4,253.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development (i) when the last inter-departmental meeting on neighbourhood renewal was; and (ii) when the next meeting is scheduled. (AQW 7525/09)

The Minister for Social Development: (i) The last meeting of the inter-departmental Ministerial Group on Neighbourhood Renewal was held on 13 May 2009. (ii) The next meeting will take place in the autumn.

Urban Renewal Area Status

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development when she will make a decision on the urban renewal area status for deprived areas of north Belfast. (AQW 7533/09)

The Minister for Social Development: There are currently a number of proposals with my Department for regeneration activity across 15 different communities, including several in North Belfast.

Once the Department and the Housing Executive has identified the most appropriate approach to meeting this housing need, I will ensure the members who represent those constituencies are notified.

Housing Benefits

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications for Housing Benefit have been lodged with Ards Housing Executive in each of the last 12 months. (AQW 7569/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of Housing Benefit applications received by the Housing Executive's Housing Benefit Service Unit in Newtownards between April 2008 and March 2009 is broken down as follows:

| | |
|------------|--------------------------------|
| April 2008 | 459 applications were received |
| May 2008 | 526 |
| June 2008 | 601 |
| July 2008 | 459 |

| | |
|----------------|-------------|
| August 2008 | 490 |
| September 2008 | 579 |
| October 2008 | 654 |
| November 2008 | 600 |
| December 2008 | 396 |
| January 2009 | 593 |
| February 2009 | 784 |
| March 2009 | 789 |
| Total | 6930 |

Housing Benefit Applications

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how long the Housing Executive in Ards took to process Housing Benefit applications in each of the last 12 months. (AQW 7570/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive's target is to assess 90% of Housing Benefit claims within 14 days of receiving all of the necessary supporting documentation. The following information details performance against that target by the Housing Executive's Housing Benefit Service Unit in Newtownards for each month between April 2008 and March 2009 -

HOUSING BENEFIT

| | Month | Applications cleared within 14 days of receiving all necessary supporting documentation |
|------|--------------|---|
| 2008 | April | 78.89% |
| | May | 71.54% |
| | June | 75.28% |
| | July | 71.24% |
| | August | 78.27% |
| | September | 67.04% |
| | October | 75.98% |
| | November | 60.96% |
| | December | 55.18% |
| 2009 | January | 52.21% |
| | February | 64.42% |
| | March | 63.76% |
| | Total | 68% |

These performance figures reflect the significant recent increase in the level of housing benefit claims received by the Housing Executive.

Income Support Claims

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many fresh Income Support claims were received in the Bangor Social Security office in (i) 2007/08; and (ii) 2008/09. (AQW 7583/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is detailed in the table below.

| Financial Year | No. of Income Support fresh claims received in Bangor Social Security Office |
|----------------|--|
| 2007/2008 | 890 |
| 2008/2009 | 777 |

This information has been extracted from Social Security Agency internal monitoring systems.

Housing in West Green, Holywood

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development when her Department will make a decision on the future of housing in West Green in Holywood. (AQW 7588/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive is currently preparing an economic appraisal outlining options for the West Green area of Holywood.

These are expected to be submitted for approval in late summer 2009 and thereafter delivery of the proposed works will be dependent on the availability of resources at that time.

Armagh Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Board

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development if her Department's officials and the Armagh Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Board are in contravention of their own guidelines by continuing to hold meetings and make decisions without community representation at board meetings. (AQW 7631/09)

The Minister for Social Development: No meetings have been held or decisions taken by the Armagh Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Board without a community representative being present.

Armagh Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Board

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development if she can ensure that the action plan agreed by the Armagh Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Board, with community input, will be delivered in full. (AQW 7633/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Officials from my department have been engaging with all the relevant parties to ensure that the action plan agreed by the Armagh Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Board will be delivered to the fullest extent possible.

Armagh Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Board

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development to investigate how decisions taken by the Armagh Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Board can be over-ruled or changed by her Department's officials, leading to community representatives losing confidence in the Board and believing they are not equal partners. (AQW 7635/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department has produced guidelines on the role of Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships. Partnerships are advisory bodies whose role is to focus on identifying local priorities and work to influence and contribute to the determining of Government spending priorities for their neighbourhoods. I am satisfied that my officials have acted in accordance with these guidelines in its engagements with the Armagh Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Board.

Bonfires in East Antrim

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the total expenditure in 2008 resulting from bonfires in the East Antrim area. (AQW 7639/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The clean-up costs associated with bonfires for the Housing Executive's Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownabbey 1 District Office areas (which comprise the East Antrim parliamentary constituency) for 2008 are detailed in the table below.

| District office | Clean-up costs |
|-----------------|----------------|
| Carrickfergus | £3,410 |
| Larne | £100 |
| Newtownabbey 1 | £5,048 |
| Total | £8,558 |

Bonfires in East Antrim

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the estimated costs of the July bonfires in the East Antrim area for 2009. (AQW 7640/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive no longer provides funding for bonfire initiatives. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has agreed to directly support those Council bonfire initiatives which had previously been funded by the Housing Executive, as well as all new requests for financial support for such projects in the coming year.

Strategic Review Plan for Social Security Offices

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the Strategic Review Plan for Social Security Offices in (i) Coleraine; (ii) Ballymoney; and (iii) Limavady. (AQW 7642/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The current Strategic Business Review proposals covering the SSA local operations network which includes the Jobs & Benefits offices in Coleraine, Ballymoney and Limavady are set out in the Equality Impact Assessment document. This was issued for public consultation on 23 April 2009 with comments due by 17 June 2009. Decisions will not be made on any of the proposals until public consultation is complete and the responses assessed.

Social Housing Projects

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Social Development when the annual list of social housing projects receiving funding will be published. (AQW 7687/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is still finalising the Social Housing Development

Programme. They expect to submit it to me in the coming weeks and when approved will be published on www.nihe.gov.uk. I will also place a copy in the Assembly Library.

Departmental Land

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Social Development if, in light of the current economic crisis and with rising fuel and food prices, he has any plans to release departmental land for the use of local communities to grow affordable food and make local food more sustainable. (AQW 7705/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department currently has no plans to release departmental land. However, I have recently provided £19,000 for a community based project to help re-establish allotments on Northern Ireland Housing Executive land in the Enniskillen Neighbourhood Renewal Area.

Social Housing

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development how many social houses have been bought ‘off the shelf’ since she came into office. (AQW 7708/09)

The Minister for Social Development: 270 units were purchased on an ‘off the shelf’ basis in 2007/08 and a further 299 in 2008/09.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the total number; and (ii) the percentage of the population in, receipt of Disability Living Allowance, in each electoral ward. (AQW 7710/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The table below sets out the information requested for part (i) The number of people in receipt of Disability Living Allowance by electoral ward area. The figures given reflect the number of Disability Living Allowance recipients at the date of extract which is 21st March 2009.

(ii) The percentage of the population in receipt of Disability Living Allowance is not available as population figures are not held at ward level.

DLA RECIPIENTS SPLIT BY WARD (MARCH 2009)

| Ward | Frequency | Ward | Frequency |
|---------------|-----------|----------------|-----------|
| Abbey | 244 | Glen Road | 1016 |
| Abbey Park | 304 | Glenaan | 105 |
| Academy | 131 | Glenariff | 137 |
| Aghagallon | 358 | Glenarm | 93 |
| Aghanloo | 313 | Glenavy | 349 |
| Agivey | 143 | Glencairn | 627 |
| Ahoghill | 244 | Glencolin | 1286 |
| Aldergrove | 305 | Glenderg | 412 |
| Altmore | 276 | Glendun | 78 |
| Altnagelvin | 507 | Glengormley | 275 |
| Andersonstown | 953 | Glenravel | 173 |
| Annagh | 294 | Glenshesk | 47 |
| Annalong | 308 | Glentaisie | 165 |
| Antiville | 160 | Glenwhirry | 156 |
| Ardboe | 377 | Glynn | 122 |
| Ardeevin | 141 | Gortalee | 167 |
| Ardglass | 394 | Gortalowry | 288 |
| Ardoyne | 1260 | Gortin | 216 |
| Armoy | 91 | Gortrush | 469 |
| Artigarvan | 305 | Grahams Bridge | 310 |
| Atlantic | 165 | Grange | 167 |
| Audleys Acre | 252 | Gransha | 204 |
| Augher | 139 | Greenisland | 178 |
| Aughnacloy | 242 | Gregstown | 317 |
| Ballee | 251 | Gresteel | 295 |

| Ward | Frequency | Ward | Frequency |
|---------------------|-----------|-----------------------|-----------|
| Ballinamallard | 206 | Greystone (Antrim) | 243 |
| Ballinderry | 270 | Greystone (Limavady) | 241 |
| Balloo | 213 | Groomsport | 180 |
| Ballybay | 295 | Gulladuff | 196 |
| Ballybot | 420 | Hamiltonsbawn | 215 |
| Ballycarry | 124 | Harbour (Larne) | 142 |
| Ballyclare North | 264 | Harbour (North Down) | 176 |
| Ballyclare South | 286 | Harmony Hill | 195 |
| Ballycolman | 350 | Harryville | 206 |
| Ballycraigy | 245 | Hawthorne | 269 |
| Ballycrochan | 294 | Highfield | 766 |
| Ballydown | 283 | Hightown | 225 |
| Ballyduff | 271 | Hilden | 326 |
| Ballygawley | 298 | Hillfoot | 133 |
| Ballygowan | 203 | Hillhall | 317 |
| Ballyhackamore | 348 | Hillsborough | 163 |
| Ballyhanwood | 192 | Hockley | 166 |
| Ballyhenry | 287 | Holly Mount | 402 |
| Ballyhoe and Corkey | 131 | Hollywood Demesne | 174 |
| Ballyholme | 92 | Hollywood Priory | 124 |
| Ballykeel | 174 | Hopefield | 203 |
| Ballykelly | 161 | Irvinestown | 316 |
| Ballyloran | 149 | Island | 567 |
| Ballylough | 67 | Island Magee | 130 |
| Ballyloughan | 118 | Jordanstown | 309 |
| Ballymacarrett | 917 | Katesbridge | 182 |
| Ballymacash | 162 | Keady | 247 |
| Ballymacbrennan | 134 | Kells | 251 |
| Ballymaconnell | 128 | Kernan | 416 |
| Ballymacoss | 508 | Kesh Ederney and Lack | 318 |
| Ballymagee | 235 | Kilfennan | 286 |
| Ballymaglave | 272 | Kilkeel Central | 383 |
| Ballymaguigan | 169 | Kilkeel South | 330 |
| Ballymartrim | 267 | Killeen | 219 |
| Ballymote | 497 | Killinchy | 116 |
| Ballynafeigh | 406 | Killoquin Lower | 152 |
| Ballynahinch East | 287 | Killoquin Upper | 96 |
| Ballynashallog | 330 | Killough | 366 |
| Ballynure | 154 | Killiclogher | 423 |

| Ward | Frequency | Ward | Frequency |
|-------------------------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|
| Ballyoran | 331 | Killycolpy | 280 |
| Ballyrainey | 233 | Killycomain | 249 |
| Ballyrobert | 220 | Killycrot | 338 |
| Ballysaggart | 329 | Killylea | 220 |
| Ballysally | 251 | Killyleagh | 267 |
| Ballysillan | 683 | Killyman | 231 |
| Ballywalter | 333 | Killymeal | 219 |
| Ballyward | 185 | Killymoon | 289 |
| Banagher | 233 | Kilmore | 184 |
| Banbridge West | 314 | Kilrea | 217 |
| Bangor Castle | 237 | Kilwaughter | 255 |
| Bannside | 176 | Kilwee | 586 |
| Beechill | 403 | Kinbane | 55 |
| Beechmount | 1010 | Kircubbin | 329 |
| Beechwood | 458 | Knock | 384 |
| Belcoo and Garrison | 167 | Knockagh | 118 |
| Bellaghy | 191 | Knockaholet | 101 |
| Belleek and Boa | 213 | Knockbracken | 159 |
| Bellevue | 492 | Knockcloghrim | 174 |
| Belmont | 479 | Knocklayd | 195 |
| Benburb | 210 | Knocklynn | 201 |
| Benvardin | 163 | Knockmore | 375 |
| Beragh | 291 | Knocknashane | 273 |
| Bessbrook | 357 | Ladybrook | 1067 |
| Binnian | 278 | Lagan Valley | 336 |
| Blackcave | 157 | Lambeg | 255 |
| Blackhead | 158 | Laurelvale | 221 |
| Blackstaff | 507 | Lawrencetown | 281 |
| Blaris | 210 | Lecumpher | 197 |
| Bleary | 329 | Legoniel | 862 |
| Bloomfield (Belfast) | 582 | Lisanelly | 400 |
| Bloomfield (North Down) | 337 | Lisbane | 108 |
| Bluefield | 164 | Lisbellaw | 176 |
| Boho Cleenish and Letterbreen | 178 | Lisnacree | 286 |
| Bonamargy and Rathlin | 75 | Lisnagarvy | 228 |
| Boneybefore | 123 | Lisnagelvin | 459 |
| Botanic | 566 | Lisnarrick | 138 |
| Bradshaws Brae | 220 | Lisnasharragh | 225 |
| Brandywell | 549 | Lisnaskea | 330 |

| Ward | Frequency | Ward | Frequency |
|----------------------|-----------|------------------------|-----------|
| Broadway | 140 | Lissan | 181 |
| Brookeborough | 163 | Loughbrickland | 262 |
| Broughshane | 190 | Loughgall | 262 |
| Brownstown | 336 | Loughries | 236 |
| Bryansburn | 123 | Loughview | 237 |
| Burleigh Hill | 255 | Love Lane | 177 |
| Burnthill | 194 | Lower Braniel | 229 |
| Burren and Kilbroney | 266 | Lower Glenshane | 189 |
| Bushmills | 65 | Macosquin | 150 |
| Cairnshill | 176 | Maghaberry | 286 |
| Caledon | 206 | Maghera | 269 |
| Callan Bridge | 343 | Magheralave | 182 |
| Camlough | 369 | Magheralin | 336 |
| Camowen | 365 | Magilligan | 185 |
| Carn Hill | 505 | Maguiresbridge | 199 |
| Carnany | 207 | Mallusk | 354 |
| Carncastle | 165 | Malone | 205 |
| Carnlough | 173 | Markethill | 303 |
| Carnmoney | 257 | Massereene | 353 |
| Carnmoon | 93 | Mayobridge | 275 |
| Carrigatuke | 225 | Maze | 212 |
| Carrowdore | 256 | Milebush | 138 |
| Carrowreagh | 368 | Milford | 203 |
| Carryduff East | 252 | Millisle | 333 |
| Carryduff West | 179 | Minnowburn | 319 |
| Castle Demesne | 216 | Moat | 218 |
| Castlecaulfield | 250 | Moirá | 275 |
| Castlecoole | 343 | Moneymore | 239 |
| Castledawson | 247 | Moneyreagh | 222 |
| Castlederg | 460 | Monkstown | 395 |
| Castlerock | 171 | Moss-Side and Moyarget | 78 |
| Castleview | 504 | Mossley | 327 |
| Castlewellan | 357 | Mount Sandel | 114 |
| Cathedral | 482 | Mourneview | 337 |
| Cavehill | 296 | Movilla | 264 |
| Caw | 381 | Moy | 213 |
| Central (Ards) | 362 | Moygashel | 212 |
| Central (Coleraine) | 218 | Mullaghmore | 322 |
| Central (Larne) | 194 | Murlough | 336 |

| Ward | Frequency | Ward | Frequency |
|------------------------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|
| Charlemont | 252 | Musgrave | 454 |
| Cherryvalley | 339 | New Buildings | 356 |
| Chichester Park | 606 | New Lodge | 1255 |
| Church | 296 | Newbuildings | 238 |
| Churchill | 187 | Newhill | 303 |
| Churchland | 287 | Newtownbreda | 151 |
| Clady | 147 | Newtownbutler | 256 |
| Clanabogan | 296 | Newtownhamilton | 268 |
| Clandeboyne | 318 | Newtownsaville | 222 |
| Clare | 371 | Newtownstewart | 303 |
| Claudy | 346 | North | 391 |
| Cliftonville | 785 | Northland | 205 |
| Clipperstown | 195 | Oaklands | 167 |
| Clogh Mills | 127 | Observatory | 224 |
| Clogher | 207 | Old Warren | 340 |
| Clonallan | 435 | Oldtown | 323 |
| Clonard | 975 | Orangefield | 382 |
| Clondermot | 470 | Owenkillew | 240 |
| Cloughfern | 306 | Park | 101 |
| Coagh | 249 | Parkgate | 128 |
| Coalisland North | 495 | Parklake | 392 |
| Coalisland South | 432 | Pennyburn | 268 |
| Coalisland West and Newmills | 280 | Plumbridge | 221 |
| Collin Glen | 1136 | Poleglass | 581 |
| Collinbridge | 223 | Pomeroy | 264 |
| Comber East | 264 | Portaferry | 457 |
| Comber North | 230 | Portavogie | 561 |
| Comber West | 145 | Portglenone | 219 |
| Conlig | 506 | Portora | 346 |
| Coole | 333 | Portstewart | 150 |
| Coolessan | 227 | Poyntz Pass | 239 |
| Coolhill | 211 | Princetown | 150 |
| Coolnagard | 489 | Quilly | 153 |
| Corcrair | 415 | Quoile | 281 |
| Court | 637 | Randalstown | 243 |
| Craigavad | 124 | Rathbrady | 149 |
| Craigy Hill | 225 | Rathfriland | 284 |
| Craigywarren | 108 | Rathgael | 137 |
| Cranfield | 189 | Ravenhill | 334 |

| Ward | Frequency | Ward | Frequency |
|-------------------------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|
| Crawfordsburn | 95 | Rich Hill | 212 |
| Cregagh | 262 | Ringsend | 159 |
| Creggan | 348 | Roeside | 193 |
| Creggan Central | 529 | Rosemount | 375 |
| Creggan South | 451 | Rosetta | 372 |
| Crevagh | 793 | Rosslea | 171 |
| Cross Glebe | 274 | Rossorry | 244 |
| Crossgar | 200 | Rostrevor | 233 |
| Crossmaglen | 412 | Rostulla | 200 |
| Crumlin (Antrim) | 369 | Route | 214 |
| Crumlin (Belfast) | 1035 | Royal Portrush | 199 |
| Cullybackey | 219 | Saintfield | 181 |
| Culmore | 999 | Sandholes | 180 |
| Cultra | 65 | Scrabo | 290 |
| Daisy Hill | 524 | Seacon | 213 |
| Dalriada | 113 | Seaforde | 272 |
| Demesne | 246 | Seapatrick | 220 |
| Dergmoney | 297 | Seaview | 324 |
| Derryaghy | 809 | Seymour Hill | 248 |
| Derryboy | 168 | Shaftesbury | 1214 |
| Derrygonnelly | 190 | Shankill | 863 |
| Derryleckagh | 371 | Shantallow East | 510 |
| Derrylin | 128 | Shantallow West | 914 |
| Derrymore | 398 | Shilvodan | 159 |
| Derrynoose | 285 | Shimna | 292 |
| Derrytrasna | 455 | Silver Bridge | 329 |
| Dervock | 133 | Silverstream | 220 |
| Devenish | 271 | Sion Mills | 398 |
| Doagh | 155 | Sixmilecross | 266 |
| Donagh | 188 | Slemish | 91 |
| Donaghadee North | 207 | Slievekirk | 252 |
| Donaghadee South | 309 | South | 400 |
| Donaghcloney | 197 | Spelga | 324 |
| Donaghmore (Dungannon) | 221 | Spring Hill | 189 |
| Donaghmore (Newry and Mourne) | 281 | Springfarm | 305 |
| Donard | 301 | Springtown | 452 |
| Downs | 348 | St Marys | 338 |
| Downshire | 202 | St Patricks | 425 |
| Draperstown | 263 | Steeple | 226 |

| Ward | Frequency | Ward | Frequency |
|-----------------------|-----------|--------------------|-----------|
| Dromara | 252 | Stewartstown | 291 |
| Dromore | 350 | Stiles | 236 |
| Dromore North | 211 | Stormont | 222 |
| Dromore South | 264 | Strand (Coleraine) | 77 |
| Drumalane | 396 | Strand (Derry) | 543 |
| Drumanaway | 135 | Strangford | 241 |
| Drumaness | 359 | Stranmillis | 158 |
| Drumbo | 120 | Stranocum | 124 |
| Drumgask | 624 | Strule | 271 |
| Drumglass | 303 | Summerfield | 184 |
| Drumgor | 447 | Sunnylands | 239 |
| Drumgullion | 451 | Swatragh | 205 |
| Drumnakilly | 344 | Sydenham | 534 |
| Drumnamoe | 584 | Taghnevan | 480 |
| Drumquin | 268 | Tandragee | 237 |
| Drumragh | 352 | Tavanagh | 313 |
| Dufferin | 286 | Templepatrick | 109 |
| Dunanney | 335 | Tempo | 191 |
| Duncairn | 774 | Termon | 355 |
| Dunclug | 194 | The Birches | 255 |
| Dundonald | 180 | The Cut | 267 |
| Dundooan | 158 | The Cuts | 274 |
| Dundrum | 263 | The Diamond | 417 |
| Dungiven | 209 | The Highlands | 161 |
| Dunloy | 148 | The Loop | 221 |
| Dunluce | 105 | The Mall | 182 |
| Dunminning | 149 | The Mount | 805 |
| Dunmore | 221 | The Vow | 139 |
| Dunmurry | 313 | Tobermore | 212 |
| Dunnamanagh | 272 | Tollymore | 335 |
| Dunnamore | 240 | Tonagh | 313 |
| Dunseverick | 57 | Toome | 218 |
| East | 406 | Town Parks | 144 |
| Ebrington | 327 | Town Parks East | 284 |
| Eden | 298 | Town Parks West | 181 |
| Edenderry (Banbridge) | 361 | Trillick | 193 |
| Edenderry (Craigavon) | 319 | Tullagh | 265 |
| Eglinton | 336 | Tullycarnet | 295 |
| Enagh (Derry) | 463 | Tullyhappy | 221 |

| Ward | Frequency | Ward | Frequency |
|----------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|---------------|
| Enagh (Limavady) | 272 | Twinbrook | 616 |
| Enler | 345 | University | 240 |
| Erne | 344 | Upper Braniel | 183 |
| Fair Green | 163 | Upper Glenshane | 179 |
| Fairhill | 214 | Upper Malone | 414 |
| Fairy Water | 201 | Upper Springfield | 1261 |
| Falls | 1254 | Upperlands | 217 |
| Falls Park | 889 | Valley (Magherafelt) | 182 |
| Farranshane | 242 | Valley (Newtownabbey) | 389 |
| Fathom | 311 | Victoria (Carrickfergus) | 224 |
| Feeny | 174 | Victoria (Derry) | 362 |
| Finaghy | 294 | Victoria Bridge | 299 |
| Finn | 366 | Wallace Park | 132 |
| Fintona | 314 | Waringstown | 234 |
| Fivemiletown | 185 | Washing Bay | 329 |
| Florencecourt and Kinawley | 162 | Water Works | 1014 |
| Forest | 204 | Waterside | 115 |
| Forkhill | 349 | West | 444 |
| Fort | 262 | Westland | 410 |
| Fortwilliam | 458 | Whitehead | 111 |
| Fountain Hill | 232 | Whitehill | 245 |
| Foyle Springs | 468 | Whitehouse | 327 |
| Galgorm | 147 | Whiterock | 1441 |
| Galwally | 131 | Whitespots | 164 |
| Gardenmore | 168 | Windsor | 359 |
| Garvagh | 189 | Windsor Hill | 314 |
| Gilford | 286 | Woodburn | 165 |
| Gilnahirk | 118 | Woodstock | 695 |
| Glack | 191 | Woodvale | 788 |
| Glebe (Ballymoney) | 145 | Woodville | 428 |
| Glebe (Magherafelt) | 273 | Wynchurch | 171 |
| Glebe (Newtownabbey) | 256 | Not Recorded | 1109 |
| Glen | 212 | Total | 176847 |

In producing this analysis individual benefit records were attributed to Electoral Wards on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a ward using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

Environmental Improvement Schemes

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development pursuant to AQW 7442/09, to detail the cost for the completion of Phase One of the Environmental Improvement Schemes in the Market area, South Belfast.

(AQW 7727/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The final value of Phase One was £165,241.

Environmental Improvement Schemes

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development pursuant to AQW 7442/09, to detail the cost for the completion of Phase Two of the Environmental Improvement Schemes in the Market area, South Belfast. (AQW 7728/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The final value of Phase Two was £384,820.

Social Housing

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Social Development, for each of the last two years, the number of properties her Department has purchased for social housing in the Newry and Armagh constituency; and how many of those are occupied. (AQW 7735/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of properties purchased for social housing in the Newry and Armagh constituency in each of the last two years is as follows:-

| | |
|---------|----|
| 2007/08 | 34 |
| 2008/09 | 70 |

Of the 104 properties purchased, 79 are occupied. The other 25 are not occupied because the schemes are not completed.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development when the Warm Homes Scheme will be resumed; and to give an assurance that people already on the waiting list will be dealt with. (AQW 7738/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive expects to award the Warm Homes Scheme contract on 26 May 2009 and I would expect the scheme to be operational at the earliest opportunity.

Applicants who had expressed an interest in receiving assistance for insulation measures should receive assistance once the scheme is operational.

My officials have been working with Eaga and identified those people on the waiting list whose heating systems have broken down beyond repair and I am pleased to confirm that all of these households will have heating measures installed by the end of May. The remaining applicants have functioning heating systems and although some of these systems may be inefficient, they are still working. If these people believe they meet the new criteria they will be welcome to apply to the new scheme when it opens for applications.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Lord and Lady Craigavon's Portland Stone Sarcophagus

Mr Elliott asked the Assembly Commission if it will consider cleaning Lord and Lady Craigavon's Portland stone sarcophagus, so that the writing can be restored. (AQW 7711/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Neeson): The Assembly Commission is keen to ensure that Parliament Buildings and its environs are always kept properly maintained.

Properties Directorate are currently giving consideration to carrying out specialist stone cleaning in several areas and this will be extended to include Lord and Lady Craigavon's Portland stone sarcophagus.

Portland stone is quite a soft stone and there is some evidence of damage to the inscription on the sarcophagus. Further consultation will be necessary with stone conservation specialists, staff from the Department of Finance and Personnel's Properties Division and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency to agree an effective cleaning regime that does not risk causing further damage.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 29 May 2009

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Quangos

Mr McNarry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what was the total spent on salaries, allowances and expenses for Board members of QUANGO's in each of the last three years; and to confirm the number of individuals who were involved and the average cost per QUANGO board member.

(AQW 6482/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr McGuinness): The total spent on salaries, allowance and expenses for board members of OFMDFM sponsored public bodies in each of the last three financial years (for which accounts are available), the number of individuals involved and the average cost per board member is as follows:

| | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 |
|--|------------|------------|------------|
| The total spent on salaries, allowances and expenses | £1,415,917 | £1,494,788 | £1,684,651 |
| The number of individuals involved | 78 | 77 | 76 |
| The average cost per Board member | £18,152.78 | £19,412.83 | £22,166.46 |

11 July Bonfires

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to report on its assessment of best practice in relation to 11 July bonfires and good relations programmes.

(AQW 6855/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: OFMDFM does not assess best practice in relation to 11 July bonfires and associated good relations programmes; however we are informed that some District Councils have established bonfire schemes which encourage local communities to adopt a different approach to the management of bonfire events. Some Councils operate bonfire initiatives/bonfire management programmes. These programmes aim to encourage local communities and groups to ensure bonfires are better managed community and family occasions. The programmes also address the need to manage health and safety risks to tackle environmental issues.

Other Councils are moving towards the use of beacons instead of bonfires, in projects which teach the history behind the bonfire tradition. In 2008 the Woodvale area in north Belfast used a beacon for the first time. There was a community/family festival for the area and the beacon was a secondary part of the event and not the main focus of activities and alcohol played a less prominent role than as seen in previous years.

The District Councils Good Relations Programme received funding of £2.536m in 2008/2009 for a range of local good relations activities all of which have been predicated on the findings of good relations audits/research which identify and prioritise the local needs for those activities/initiatives within the respective Council areas.

Child Poverty

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions it has had with bodies who made representations to the Assembly Committee's Inquiry on Child Poverty, in light of the current economic difficulties. (AQW 7571/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Since last year the Executive has been committed to doing everything in its power to ensure that people here are protected and sheltered in every way possible from the worst effects of the current economic downturn.

In recent months we have listened, through both formal and informal discussions, to the concerns of stakeholders across all sectors of the economy, including the voluntary and community sector.

Building on these discussions we have now established a Cross Sector Advisory Forum which we chair; this is an informal and ad hoc advisory group that meets and reviews the impact of the current economic downturn on local people and businesses. The purpose of the Cross Sector Advisory Forum is to make recommendations for addressing problems arising from the economic crisis.

The Forum has 35 members including Ministers and representatives from the banking, construction, energy and voluntary and community sectors. Some Forum members representing the voluntary and community sector, such as the Consumer Council and the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network, made representations to the OFMDFM Committee during its Inquiry into Child Poverty.

The inaugural meeting of the Forum was held on 6 April 2009. During this meeting initial views were gathered on the enduring problems of the economic downturn and how these might be addressed. We plan to convene a second meeting of the Forum before the summer recess.

You will also be aware that on 20 November 2008 the Executive agreed to adopt formally the broad architecture and principles of Lifetime Opportunities as the basis of its strategy to tackle poverty and social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on social need; and that the Executive agreed also to the re-establishment of the Ministerial-led Poverty and Social Inclusion Stakeholder Forum.

The Stakeholder Forum, which we hope to re-establish soon, also affords its members the opportunity to raise areas of concern directly with Ministers.

The Stakeholder Forum is made up of representatives from Government Departments and from the major voluntary and community sector organisations; a number of these organisations including, for example, the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network, Save the Children and the Rural Community Network, had made representations to the OFMDFM Committee's Inquiry into Child Poverty.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if the promotion of the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy is still a priority given the current economic difficulties. (AQW 7607/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Improving relationships between and within all communities and building a shared and better future remains a high priority for our Department and 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. As Junior Minister Donaldson stated in the recent debate [5th May] in the Assembly on the costs of division, economic growth and prosperity are important and they are underpinned by stability in society. He also stated that sharing in that economic growth will further promote that stability. There can be no place in our society for inequality, racism, sectarianism or prejudice.

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, 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 has been 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.

We are still determined to bring the programme forward as soon as possible.

Victim and Survivors Service

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the Victims Commission will complete its assessment of the needs of victims and survivors. (AQW 7823/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Commissioners have indicated that the Comprehensive Needs Assessment will take a minimum of 6 months to complete.

Victim and Survivors Service

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how it will ensure that there will be no duplication of an individual victim/survivors' needs assessment by their service proposed in the draft Victims and Survivors Strategy and that provided by the Health Service. (AQW 7824/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Draft proposals for the Victims and Survivors Service will be issued for public consultation in the very near future. We will engage with all key stakeholders to ensure the best outcome for victims and survivors. Ensuring there is no duplication in the provision of services has been a key consideration throughout the process.

Victim and Survivors Service

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the criteria used to ensure that expenditure by the Victims and Survivors Services is on a fair and equitable basis. (AQW 7825/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Draft proposals for a Victims and Survivors Service will be issued for public consultation in the very near future. The service will be needs based and funding will be delivered in accordance with clear, published criteria in a transparent way. The need will be identified by the comprehensive needs assessment being taken forward by the Commission for Victims and Survivors.

The Victims Service will be subject to an equality screening exercise, the outcome of which will determine if a full EQIA is required.

Victim and Survivors Service

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the timetable for producing legislation on the establishment of the non-departmental public body for the Victim and Survivors Service. (AQW 7826/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We anticipate that the legislative process in relation to the Victims and Survivors service could take up to 12 months to complete. However, it may be possible to reduce this timeframe, with the agreement of the OFMDFM Committee. We are keen to ensure that the new service is operative as soon as possible.

School Age Childcare

Mrs Long asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action has been taken to date by the Department to clarify departmental responsibility for school age childcare. (AQW 7867/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The provision of childcare has long been a fragmented and complex issue with no clear departmental lead. This has ultimately resulted in the position we now find ourselves in. However, Executive commitment to reviewing and improving the provision here is clearly demonstrated by the work being taken forward through the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People.

The Ministerial Sub-Committee identified childcare as an urgent priority and members of the child poverty sub-group have expressed the need to look at the issue of departmental responsibility for childcare as part of their work. That sub-group has undertaken an exercise to produce a report considering the potential for increasing childcare provision.

The report includes a chapter on strategic options, which identifies a number of strategic options for delivering childcare policy. A special meeting involving relevant Ministers will shortly be convened to consider the recommendations in the report.

Young People's Action Plan

Mrs Long asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the adoption of the young people's action plan. (AQW 7868/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The children and young people's strategy action plan has been signed off by the cross-sectoral Strategy, Planning and Review Group (SPRG), which was established as one of the implementation structures for the 10-Year Strategy.

It was agreed that the action plan will be a 'living document' open to review and amendment and that direct engagement with young people will form an integral part of this review.

We also intend to work with Executive colleagues to identify whether any further actions can be included specifically on the issues raised by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in their concluding observations of October 2008.

The action plan has been sent to the OFMDFM Committee for consideration and we intend to seek Executive approval when the views of the Committee have been received.

Committee on Poverty and Social Inclusion

Mrs Long asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the work of the Executive Sub committee on poverty and social inclusion and its forward work plan. (AQW 7870/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: In agreeing, on 20th November 2008, to formally adopt the broad architecture and principles of Lifetime Opportunities as the basis of its strategy to tackle poverty and social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on social need, the Executive further agreed to the establishment of an Executive Sub-Committee on poverty and social inclusion.

This Executive Sub-Committee is 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.

To date the Executive Sub-Committee has met on two occasions, the most recent meeting taking place on 21 May 2009.

During the course of its first two meetings the Sub-Committee has;

- agreed its Terms of Reference which take account of recommendations arising from the OFMDFM Committee, including its recent recommendations on child poverty, the PSI Reports on *Lone Parents* and *People with a Disability* and Departmental reports in as much as they are relevant to the Terms of Reference of the Committee;
- been informed as to the extent of poverty in Northern Ireland;

- agreed that work should be undertaken to identify the key co-ordinated priority actions that are needed to benefit those areas, groups and individuals in greatest objective need;
- considered and agreed proposals in respect of a monitoring and reporting framework for the 'Lifetime Opportunities' Strategy; and
- agreed to an early re-establishment of the Ministerial-led Poverty and Social Inclusion Stakeholder Forum.

It is proposed that initial recommendations, in respect of the key co-ordinated actions needed to benefit those areas, groups and individuals in greatest objective need, will be considered at the Executive Sub-Committee's next meeting.

Cleaning Products

Mr McHugh asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to purchase cleaning, household or toiletry products which, including their contents, have not been tested on animals.

(AQW 7971/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Procurement of cleaning products for use in all NICS departments and management of the cleaning contract are the responsibility of the Department of Finance and Personnel, through its Central Procurement Directorate.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has no plans to purchase cleaning products outside of the current central contract arrangements.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

DARD Direct in Newtownards

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the roll-out of DARD Direct in Newtownards, including any sites which have been examined.

(AQW 7610/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Following my announcement on 23 January 2009 of 10 of the 11 remaining locations, DARD has put in place an implementation plan for the roll out of DARD Direct. The roll out will take place in a number of phases. The current DARD offices in Newtownards are unable to meet the requirements for a DARD Direct office and as a consequence a property search has been initiated through Land and Property Services in the Newtownards area to ascertain the availability of suitable premises. I am currently unable to provide specific details of sites.

In the meantime, the DARD Direct management processes will be rolled out to Newtownards from mid-summer onwards to allow farmers to avail of the benefits of an improved customer service.

Fines Paid to Department

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail, since she first took office, (i) all fines that have been paid by her Department; (ii) all fines yet to be paid by her Department; (iii) all financial settlements that have been paid by her Department; and (iv) all agreed settlements yet to be paid by her Department.

(AQW 7681/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

- (i) Nil return
- (ii) Nil return
- (iii) Number of Settlements: 18. Cost of Settlements: £557.6k
- (iv) Number of Settlements: 5. Cost of Settlements: £41.0k

Rivers Agency

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the processes followed by Rivers Agency when it is presented with evidence of repeat out of sewer or other flooding on the site of a planning application, which they have not raised in the statutory consultation process. (AQW 7740/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There is a close liaison between DARD Rivers Agency and DOE Planning Service in the implementation of the Planning Policy Statement on prevention of inappropriate development in flood plains. In its role as a consultee, Rivers Agency provides advice to Planning Service on development proposals that are referred to it. The Agency's advice is based on the most accurate information held at the time; relating to flood risk potential from watercourses and the sea. Should further information concerning flooding from watercourses or the sea become available to the Agency after the consultation this information is conveyed to Planning Service for consideration if the application has not yet been determined by Planning Service.

Rivers Agency officials are happy to meet the public and their representatives or agents to discuss specific sites in detail as required.

EU Single Farm Payment

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) for her assessment of the EU Single Farm payment to farmers after 2013; and (ii) what representations she has made to the EU Commissioner regarding Single Farm Payment policy post 2013. (AQW 7829/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The future of the EU Single Farm Payment (SFP) from 2013 onwards will be determined by the outcome of discussions on Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform over the period 2010–2012. The eventual agreement will depend on the views of the EU Commission, Member States and the European Parliament. I have made my view very clear that the SFP should continue in some form after 2013, including during my recent speech at the Balmoral Show in the presence of the EU Agriculture Commissioner, Mariann Fischer Boel. I expect a vigorous debate to take place over the next few years both on the amount of funding devoted to the SFP and the basis on which payments are made. I am encouraged by early soundings emerging from EU Commission officials agreeing that there is a role for the SFP post 2013.

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Community Festivals Fund

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of money awarded to organisations through the Community Festivals Fund, broken down by grants awarded to organisations identified as (i) Unionists; (ii) Nationalists; and (iii) others, in 2006/07, 2007/08, 2008/09. (AQW 7698/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure does not collect or hold information on Community Festivals Fund grants which would facilitate a breakdown by grants to Unionists, Nationalists or other organisations.

Departmental Land

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when the most recent audit of departmental land was undertaken; and how much unused land the Department currently holds. (AQW 7729/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My department's assets, including land, are examined annually by the Northern Ireland Audit Office as part of its audit of the resource accounts. The last audit, which was completed in June 2008, was in respect of the year ended 31 March 2008.

The Department holds no unused land.

North West 200

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his estimate of how much will be generated for the local economy in East Londonderry by the North West 200 week-long festival of racing. (AQW 7749/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The North West 200 is Northern Ireland's largest outdoor sporting event. The last estimate of the economic benefit attached to the event in 2008 suggested a return of over £55.00 for every £1 of public sector investment – the return is likely to have increased further since then. While it is not possible to disaggregate the impact of the event in the East Londonderry area organisers estimated that the event generates in excess of £7 million to the economy with visitors spending on average £215.90 on race day.

The success of the North West 200 in attracting internationally renowned participants, out-of-state visitors and world-wide media coverage has contributed to sustained growth. By way of example, in 2007 the number of visitors was estimated at over 150,000 of which around 40% were from outside of Northern Ireland. The number of accredited journalists registered to cover the event in 2006 totalled 145. In 2008 that number had increased to 361 - many of whom were from key target markets in Europe, USA and the Far East.

Irish-Language and Ulster-Scots Organisations

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in relation to both Irish-Language and Ulster-Scots organisations to detail (i) the meetings he has arranged to attend with each; (ii) how many meetings he has had to date; (iii) what was the outcome of those meetings; and (iv) what plans he has to engage with both sectors in the future. (AQW 7791/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since becoming Minister I have met with Ulster-Scots organisations at 10 events that I have attended and have held a further separate meeting with an Ulster-Scots organisation. I have had three meetings with Irish-Language organisations. These meetings were of an informative nature with no specific outcomes. I have also chaired two NSMC meetings in Language Body Sectoral Format with both the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge in attendance and reports of these meetings are available in the Assembly's official report for Tuesday 23rd September 2008 and Tuesday 3rd February 2009. I consider all requests for meetings from Ulster-Scots and Irish-Language organisations on merit and accept or decline in line with diary commitments and availability.

World Police and Fire Games

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (i) how the interim Chief Executive for the World Police and Fire Games was appointed; (ii) who is funding the appointment; and (iii) if the permanent appointment will be made on the basis of open competition. (AQW 7799/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The interim Chief Executive was nominated by the Stakeholder Group to maintain contact with the World Police and Fire Games Federation and to support the Group with preliminary preparations for the Games in 2013. He is released by the RUC Athletic Association on a half day a week basis to undertake work for the 2013 Games.

In the event of a decision to appoint a permanent CEO this will be done on the basis of open competition.

World Police and Fire Games

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (i) who is funding the office established to administer the World Police and Fire Games; (ii) how was the staff member occupying the office recruited; and how is the post funded. (AQW 7801/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The office and the staff member currently seconded to administer the World Police and Fire Games are funded by the Stakeholders. The interim Office Manager is seconded from the RUC Athletic Association by agreement of the Board of the RUC Athletic Association. The Stakeholders meet the cost of this secondment.

World Police and Fire Games

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 5442/09, in relation to the £32,587.38 contributed by his Department towards the bid for the World Police and Fire Games, could the Minister (i) provide a breakdown of the contribution; and (ii) outline the procurement processes used.

(AQW 7802/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Detailed below is a breakdown of how the £32,587.38 was spent on the bid for the 2013 World Police and Fire Games.

| Description | Expenditure |
|--|-------------------|
| DVD Production Costs | £20,511.30 |
| Bid Team Uniform | £2,307.08 |
| Development of Logo | £770.00 |
| Production of Bid Books | £6,350.00 |
| Belfast Press Launch | £150.00 |
| Cost associated with making Presentation in Adelaide | £2,499.00 |
| Total | £32,587.38 |

Guidance on the procurement processes to be followed by NIEC is included in the Financial Memorandum between NIEC and the Department.

World Police and Fire Games

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 5455/09, which stated that external appointments and recruitment of staff would be made by accordance with current legislation and best practice, can the Minister confirm (i) that this will also apply to the appointment of the board; or (ii) are the present directors of the stakeholder group expected to transfer to the formal board when established; and (iii) when the permanent board will be in place.

(AQW 7803/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Recommendations on the arrangements for the delivery of the Games will be included in a Business Case commissioned by the Stakeholder Group which is currently being prepared.

Decisions on the appointment of a Board, should one be necessary, will be determined by the delivery arrangement chosen for the 2013 Games.

World Police and Fire Games

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 5455/09, to outline (i) what process was adopted in appointing BDO Stoy Haywood; (ii) in the event that there was open competition who scrutinized the bids; and (iii) who is paying for the consultancy work.

(AQW 7804/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: BDO Stoy Hayward were appointed by the Stakeholders after an open tendering process. The tenders were scrutinized by a working group which was appointed by the Stakeholders. Sport Northern Ireland provided the select list and assisted with the scrutinization of the applications.

The Stakeholders will pay for the consultancy work.

Departmental Spend on Consultants

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much his Department has spent on internal and external consultants, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7897/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure incurred no expenditure on internal consultants in any of the last three years. Expenditure on external consultants in these years was as follows:

| | |
|---------|------------|
| 2006-07 | £1,273,691 |
| 2007-08 | £3,534,432 |
| 2008-09 | £87,572 * |

* Figures for 2008-09 have yet to be finalised and may be subject to change following completion of the Department's Resource Accounts.

Departmental Consultations

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much his Department spent on (i) Public Notices for consultations in local or regional newspapers; and (ii) other forms of media for consultations, in each of the past three years. (AQW 7940/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The information requested is set out at Annex A.

ANNEX A

| | DCAL spend on Public notices for consultations in local or regional newspapers (£) | DCAL spend on other forms of media for consultations (£) |
|--------------|--|--|
| 2006/07 | 834 | Nil |
| 2007/08 | 9, 076 | Nil |
| 2008/09 | 1, 207 | Nil |
| Total | 11, 117 | Nil |

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Voluntary Grammar Schools

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education (i) which Voluntary Grammar Schools have operated outside their 5% annual budget; (ii) to what extent did each school operate outside their 5% annual budget; and (iii) what action has her Department taken to control any over/under spend by these schools, in each of the last three financial years. (AQW 7396/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Bíonn Scoileanna Gramadaí Deonacha ábalta leibhéil níos airde cistí neamhphoiblí scoile a fháil ná mar a bhíonn scoileanna san earnáil faoi chothabháil agus san earnáil rialaithe ábalta a fháil.

Voluntary Grammar Schools have an ability to generate higher levels of non-public school funds than schools within the maintained and controlled sectors. During the 2005/2006 and 2006/2007 financial years the Department benchmarked surpluses and deficits generated by Voluntary Grammar Schools in the same manner as that applied to other schools in the controlled and maintained sectors i.e. not taking non-public funds into account when calculating cumulative deficits and surpluses. On the basis of this analysis the Department required several schools to produce 3 year financial plans setting out how they intended to reduce the surpluses and deficits greater than 5% of their annual delegated budget to within acceptable limits. The Department has since enhanced the accountability systems operated to take full account of both public and non-public school funds available to Voluntary Grammar Schools. The Department has conducted additional financial analysis on school expenditure and receipts on this basis to more accurately assess the financial stability of schools in this sector. This has identified that during the 2007/2008 financial year there were no Voluntary Grammar Schools who under spent the delegated funding received from the Department by more than 5 % of the annual delegated amount. Additionally, analysis has confirmed that no Voluntary Grammar Schools overspent or operated a

cumulative financial deficit during the 2007/2008 financial year when taking into account the balances of their public and non-public school funds.

Derryboye Primary School

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education for an update on the provision of a new car park at Derryboye Primary School. (AQW 7609/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá tugtha le fios ag Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt go bhfuil na conraitheoirí ar an láithreán anois agus go mbeidh an tionscadal curtha i gcrích faoi thús mhí Mheán Fómhair 2009.

I have been advised by the Chief Executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board that the contractors are currently on site and the project will be completed by the beginning of September 2009.

Nursery Places

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of funded nursery places available this September; (ii) the number of children applying for funded nursery places this September, broken down by Education and Library Board area; and (iii) the reasons for any discrepancy in the two and what advice she can give to parents who have been told that the only funded nursery place available is an unreasonable distance from their home. (AQW 7779/09)

The Minister of Education: Dheimhnigh na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne go mbeidh 20,901 áit chistithe réamhscoile ar fáil do mhí Mheán Fómhair;

- (i) The Education and Library Boards have confirmed 20,901 funded preschool places available for September 2009;
- (ii) 20,041 children in their final preschool year have applied for places in September 2009. The Education and Library Board split is BELB 3,132; WELB 3,483; NEELB 4,429; SEELB 4,280; and SELB 4,717. In addition, there have been 3,130 applications for children in their penultimate preschool year; and
- (iii) The preschool phase of education is non compulsory and not every parent wants to avail of a preschool place for their child. The admissions process to preschool settings, which includes the statutory sector, voluntary sector and private settings, in respect of the 2009/10 school year is still ongoing. Under the arrangements for September 2009 Admissions the initial process of admissions was completed on 1st May, when parents received a letter notifying them of the setting for which their preschool child has been accepted. Parents of preschool aged children unplaced in settings of their choice at 1st May 2009, were advised where alternative provision is still available. Education and Library Boards are now going through the re-allocation of places process for those children who were not placed at 1st May 2009. It is expected that this process will be completed by mid to end June.

Nursery Places

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Education to detail what percentage of the children who have been offered funded nursery places are; (i) children from families on income support; and (ii) children with statemented needs, broken down by Education and Library Board area, in each of the last five years. (AQW 7780/09)

The Minister of Education: Seo a leanas céatadán na bpáistí a raibh áiteanna réamhscoile tairgthe dóibh ar bhonn chúinsí a bhain le míbhuntáistí sóisialta, i.e. páistí a bhfuil liúntas tacaíochta ioncaim, nó liúntas do lucht cuardaigh fostaíochta atá ioncam-bhunaithe, á fháil ag tuismitheoirí acu, i ngach bliain le cúig bliana anuas agus sonraithe ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne .

- (i) The percentage of children who were offered preschool places on the basis of social disadvantaged circumstances, i.e. children with parents who are in receipt of income support or income-based jobseeker's allowance, for each of the last five years, broken down by Education and Library Board, is as follows:-

| | 2004/05 (%) | 2005/06 (%) | 2006/07 (%) | 2007/08 (%) | 2008/09 (%) |
|--------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| BELB | 32.50 | 32.35 | 32.75 | 31.55 | 29.37 |
| WELB | 22.73 | 21.00 | 22.03 | 20.87 | 18.24 |
| NEELB | 12.23 | 12.48 | 11.14 | 10.71 | 10.55 |
| SEELB | 14.23 | 12.63 | 13.72 | 12.13 | 11.31 |
| SELB | 16.27 | 16.31 | 14.53 | 13.85 | 13.33 |
| Total | 18.90 | 18.24 | 18.01 | 17.02 | 15.79 |

- (ii) Children with statements of special educational needs are placed by each Education and Library Board's Special Education Section and their admission falls outside the preschool admissions process and admissions numbers. The number of children with statements of special education needs admitted for each of the last five years, broken down by Education and Library Board, is as follows:-

| | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 | 2008/09 |
|--------------|------------|-----------|------------|------------|------------|
| BELB | 10 | 5 | 7 | 11 | 12 |
| WELB | 30 | 32 | 23 | 28 | 25 |
| NEELB | 18 | 19 | 27 | 25 | 23 |
| SEELB | 20 | 13 | 22 | 18 | 21 |
| SELB | 23 | 21 | 24 | 19 | 19 |
| Total | 101 | 90 | 103 | 101 | 100 |

Funded Nursery Places

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education the number of children that were refused free nursery places in their first preference school or unit in (i) Newtownabbey; (ii) Larne; and (iii) Carrickfergus, for the 2008/09 and 2009/10 academic years. (AQW 7812/09)

The Minister of Education: Thug Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlaine an Oirthuaiscirt eolas don Roinn maidir le líon na bpáistí a léirigh céad tosaíocht d'áit i naiscoil nó in aonad naiscoile sna ceantair shonraithe, agus nár éirigh leo an chéad tosaíocht sin a fháil.

The North Eastern Education and Library Board have advised the Department of the numbers of children expressing a first preference for a place in a nursery school or nursery unit in the areas specified, and who were unsuccessful in having their first preference met. Some of these children were in their final preschool year, others were underage i.e. in their penultimate preschool year. These children may subsequently have been placed at nursery schools or nursery units other than their first preference. The information requested is set out in the tables below.

2008/09

| Area | Unplaced at first preference stage of the admissions process | | |
|---------------|--|----------|-------|
| | Final preschool year | Underage | Total |
| Carrickfergus | 47 | 35 | 82 |
| Larne | 10 | 13 | 23 |
| Newtownabbey | 178 | 121 | 299 |

2009/10

| Area | Unplaced at first preference stage of the admissions process | | |
|---------------|--|----------|-------|
| | Final preschool year | Underage | Total |
| Carrickfergus | 54 | 48 | 102 |
| Larne | 21 | 30 | 51 |
| Newtownabbey | 162 | 141 | 303 |

Consumption of Milk

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education to give her assessment on the consumption of milk in (a) nursery schools; (b) primary schools; (c) post-primary schools; and (d) special needs schools. (AQW 7833/09)

The Minister of Education: Milk and dairy products are excellent sources of several nutrients such as calcium, protein and vitamins and for this reason they are included in the Department's Nutritional Standards for School Lunches and Other Food in Schools. Every lunch served in school must contain at least one portion of food from the milk and dairy foods group and, in addition, drinking milk must be available as an option every day.

At present, free school milk is provided to all pupils at special schools, to pupils in nursery and primary schools who do not have access to school meals and to individual nursery and primary school pupils where it is deemed necessary by the Public Health Authority in the interests of their health. Subsidised milk is available to nursery, primary, and, since August 2008, post-primary pupils through the EU School Milk Scheme, administered by the Department Of Agriculture and Rural Development. I understand the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has already provided you with information in relation to this scheme. It is a matter for individual schools to decide if they wish to participate in the scheme.

Tá mé sásta, mar sin de, go mbíonn fáil ag scoileanna ar bhainne ó roinnt foinsí agus go bhfuil siad ar an eolas faoi na socruithe.

I am content, therefore, that milk is available to schools from a number of sources and that they are aware of the arrangements.

Departmental Spend on Consultants

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Education how much her Department has spent on internal and external consultants, in each of the last three years. (AQW 7835/09)

The Minister of Education: Níl eolas ar fáil go fóill maidir leis an mhéid a chaith an Roinn Oideachais ar chomhairleacht sa bhliain 2008/2009. Níor chaith an Roinn airgead ar bith ar chomhairleacht inmheánach idir na blianta 2005/06 agus 2007/08. Seo a leanas an méid a chaith an Roinn ar chomhairleacht sheachtrach idir 2007/08:

Data in relation to the Department of Education's consultancy spend in 2008/09 is not yet available. No departmental expenditure took place on internal consultancy between 2005/06 and 2007/08. Expenditure by the Department on external consultancy between 2005/06 and 2007/08 is as follows:

| Year | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 |
|-------------|----------|----------|------------|
| Expenditure | £532,244 | £905,601 | £1,067,705 |

ICT in Schools

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what plans her Department has to maximise the use of ICT in schools in relation to area planning. (AQW 7845/09)

The Minister of Education: Tríd an chur chuige nua atá ann maidir le planáil bunaithe sa cheantar, cinnteofar go bhfuil scoileanna láidre againn atá inmharthana ó thaobh oideachais de a sholáthraíonn an curaclam agus a fhreastalaíonn ar riachtanais na gceantar áitiúla.

The new area-based planning approach will help to ensure that we have strong, educationally sustainable schools delivering on the curriculum and meeting the needs of local areas. This will involve a variety of new arrangements for sharing and collaboration between schools including ICT networking as appropriate.

Departmental Consultations

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Education how much her Department spent on (i) Public Notices for consultations in local or regional newspapers; and (ii) other forms of media for consultations, in each of the past three years, (AQW 7853/09)

The Minister of Education: Seo a leanas an t-eolas a iarradh:

The information requested is as follows:

- | | | |
|------|---------|------------|
| (i) | 2006/07 | £13,391.26 |
| | 2007/08 | £5327.19 |
| | 2008/09 | £7892.51 |
| (ii) | NIL | |

Teachers

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education how many teachers are employed in the controlled sector broken down by (i) Protestant; and (ii) Roman Catholic. (AQW 7919/09)

The Minister of Education: Ní fhostaíonn an Roinn múinteoirí agus ní choinníonn sí eolas staitistiúil ar chreideamh múinteoirí.

The Department does not employ teachers and does not hold statistical information on the religious breakdown of teachers.

Primary Schools: Funding

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Education what extra finance she has directed towards primary school education since taking up office. (AQO 2779/09)

The Minister of Education: Aithníim an tábhacht a bhaineann le hinfheistiú inár mbunscoileanna; lena chinntiú go mbíonn an tús is fearr do na páistí ina saol oideachais. Ó ghlac mise leis an oifig, d'ardaigh mé leibhéil an chistithe tarmligthe a thugtar do bhunscoileanna agus thug mé isteach roinnt clár tacaíochta go speisialta do dhaltai bunscoile.

I fully recognise the importance of investing in our primary schools; to ensure children get the best start to their education. Since taking up office, I have increased the levels of delegated funding to primary schools and introduced a number of specific programmes of support for primary school pupils..

However, it must be recognised that I am working within a finite overall budget for schools and in so doing, I have had to ensure that any skewing of funds to primary schools, from within existing allocations, does not create an unduly adverse impact for the needs of pupils at other phases of learning.

As I outlined in my statement of 12 February 2008, over the three year budget period from 2008/09 to 2010/11, significant additional funding has been directed towards specifically supporting primary schools:

- £12 million specifically to help primary school teaching Principals;
- an extra £32 million for the foundation stage of the revised curriculum in primary schools;
- extra funding of £12 million for Literacy and Numeracy measures across all schools, including targeted support for disadvantaged pupils in primary schools – such as the Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry – Bright Futures;

In addition to this, I have also made available further funding of £3 million in each of the last two years to provide for increases in the Primary AWPU weighting applied to primary-age pupils.

Further to this, primary schools are now benefitting from extra funding made available to provide for the primary languages and sports programmes (over £2 million in total will be spent on these programmes in this financial year) and in recognition of the current economic hardships I have made over £1 million available to extend the uniform allowance to primary schoolchildren.

These measures represent significant increases in the levels of funding available to support primary schools and early learning, to give children the best possible start to their education.

Within available resources, there will continue to be a clear focus on maximising the levels of funding being made available to support primary learning. I have asked my officials to carry out a review of education funding and the Terms of Reference for this Review are currently being drafted.

Education Attainment

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education what action her Department is taking to improve educational attainment, particularly in areas identified in the latest report produced by the Chief Inspector of Schools.

(AQO 2780/09)

The Minister of Education: Leagann tuairisc an Phríomhchigire béim ar an obair mhaith atá á déanamh inár scoileanna ach cuireann sí in iúl go gcaithfidh muid níos mó a dhéanamh freisin. Léiríonn sí go bhfuil gá ann don chlár athruithe atá á threorú agam le dul i ngleic leis an thearcghnóthachtáil agus le caighdeáin a ardú.

The Chief Inspector's report highlights the good work in our schools but also indicates we need to do more. It clearly underlines the need for the programme of change I have been leading, to tackle underachievement and raise standards.

I have discussed the detail of the report with Stanley Goudie and every principal and board of governors has received a letter highlighting the need for action.

The issuing of final Departmental guidance for transfer 2010, following a period of consultation, with recommendations for wholly non-selective admissions criteria, will lay the foundations of a system based on social justice, equality and excellence.

On 30 April, I launched 'Every School a Good School – A Policy for School Improvement'. This flagship policy will tackle underachievement, raise standards and address the issues raised by the Chief Inspector. Its implementation will ensure all schools focus on improvement. It will be supported by the revised literacy and numeracy strategy, currently being finalised.

We know early intervention is key. The developing Early Years Strategy and Review of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion both aim to identify and address the needs of children in a coherent way as early as possible.

To help overcome potential barriers to achievement, on 1st April, I launched 'Every School A Good School – Supporting Newcomer Pupils' and I have also set up a Taskforce on Traveller education.

My reform programme clearly addresses the concerns raised by the Chief Inspector. I want to make sure that every young person has the same opportunity to succeed, regardless of socio-economic background, gender or race.

When I was appointed as Minister of Education in the restored Assembly, I inherited a system that was built around and geared towards the needs of 40% of children. Every year thousands of children were failed by the education system. For the most part, these were already disadvantaged children. I am not prepared to tolerate such inequality.

I want to see a system that is child-centred and delivers the educational outcomes we need as a society. Our focus is on the child and on the education we deliver for them, and transfer 2010 represents an important milestone in my reform programme.

School Admissions Criteria

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education to provide an example of how post-primary schools setting admissions criteria based on academic attainment could be unlawful.

(AQO 2782/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá beartas na Roinne Oideachais ar shocrú chritéir iontrála mar chuid den Treoir um Aistirú 2010, a shocrófar i ndiaidh tréimhsí chomhairliúcháin. Déanann an treoir cur síos ar réimse critéar neamh acadúla a moladh agus caithfear scoileanna aird a thabhairt ar an treoir seo.

Department of Education policy on the setting of admissions criteria is contained in transfer 2010 guidance, to be finalised following a period of consultation. The guidance describes a range of recommended non-academic admissions criteria, and schools must have regard to this guidance.

For a school's Board of Governors not to have regard for the transfer 2010 guidance issued by the Department in the drawing up of admissions criteria is unlawful. Any school that gives due regard to the guidance but chooses thereafter to depart from Departmental policy as described in the guidance leaves itself open to challenge.

The guidance explains that there remain a number of established legal requirements that all post-primary schools must comply with.

In particular, school Boards of Governors still have a responsibility to draw up admissions criteria that will enable them to identify for admission exactly the number of applicants that their admissions number, set by the Department, permits them to admit. Any school that uses admissions criteria that are not capable of doing this will be in breach of the law.

Schools must also take care to set admissions criteria that do not breach equality legislation, as described more fully in the guidance.

Northern Ireland Act 1998

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education to outline the implications of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) in relation to education policy. (AQO 2783/09)

The Minister of Education: Agus a bhfeidhmeanna á gcomhlíonadh ag an Roinn Oideachais, tugtar aird mar is cuí don ghá atá ann le comhionannas deiseanna a chothú:

- idir gach cineál duine beag beann ar a gcreideamh, ar a dtuairimí polaitíochta, ar a gcine, ar a n-aois, ar a stádas pósta nó ar a ngnéas-chlaonadh;
- idir fhir agus mhná go ginearálta; idir dhaoine atá faoi mhíchumas agus dhaoine nach bhfuil; agus idir dhaoine a bhfuil cleithiúnaithe acu agus dhaoine nach bhfuil.

The Department of Education in carrying out its functions has due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity:

- between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
- between men and women generally; between persons with a disability and persons without; and between persons with dependants and persons without.

The Equality Commission's Guide to the Statutory Duties states:

"The main aim of Section 75 is to ensure that equality of opportunity is "mainstreamed" by public authorities in their policy making, policy implementation and policy review"

Section 75 is important to education policy review and policy formulation in order to:

- recognise inequalities which exist in terms of the impact of policies on people;
- participate with those affected by policies, to check for inequalities and the extent of adverse impact; and
- revise policies, following assessment and consultation, so that equality of opportunity can be better delivered.

In a recent article, Bob Collins, Chief Commissioner of Equality Commission's stated:-

"Equality laws are fundamentally about protecting people against injustice and ensuring that everyone is treated fairly."

I very much agree with his words.

Transfer 2010

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Education to outline her response to the decision by the Catholic sector to advise all Catholic schools to implement transfer 2010 as fully as possible. (AQO 2784/09)

The Minister of Education: Leagtar amach sa treoir ar Aistriú 2010 beartas na Roinne le haghaidh aistrithe iar-bhunscoile sa bhliain 2010, agus tabharfar an beartas chun críche i ndiaidh na tréimhse comhairliúcháin.

Transfer 2010 guidance sets out the Department's policy for post-primary transfer in 2010, and will be finalised following a period of consultation.

I welcome the recent statement, reported in the media as having been issued by the principals of 90 Catholic schools following a conference in Cookstown, in which they offer support for the guidance. I note in particular the comment that:

"The availability to schools of the minister's admissions criteria makes testing superfluous and unnecessary. Our schools have no difficulty with such criteria, nor should any Catholic post-primary school".

Support for the transfer 2010 guidance has also been forthcoming in a separate statement made by the Principals of six West Belfast post-primary schools - St Louise's College; De La Salle College; St Rose's High School; St Genevieve's High School; Corpus Christi College; and Christian Brothers School.

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) has written to the Chairpersons of Boards of Governors and Principals of all Catholic Maintained Primary Schools with advice on transfer 2010. That advice asks schools to note "that in the event that they have wilfully disregarded and acted outwith advice [from DE or CCMS] it may be difficult to support the indemnification of their actions."

I also welcome much of the statement from the Commission for Catholic Education, which restates its opposition to academic selection at the age of 11 as a means of transferring to post-primary education, and I note the call for all schools in the Catholic sector to move to an alternative form of transfer. I welcome the Commission's call for schools in the Catholic sector to follow the transfer 2010 guidance as fully as possible.

I note the Commission's recognition of some of the risks involved in the operation of breakaway tests: the risk of discriminating against a child or groups of children; the risk of children having to sit multiple tests; and the risk of distorting the statutory curriculum. All of those risks and others can be avoided if the transfer 2010 guidance is complied with.

Preschool Places

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education if all those people who have applied for preschool places for their children for September 2009 will be facilitated. (AQO 2786/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá sé mar aidhm ag an Chlár um Oideachas Réamhscoile a Leathnú bliain amháin d'ardchaighdeán oideachais chistithe réamhscoile a sholáthar do gach páiste ar mian lena dtuismitheoirí í, sa bhliain roimh oideachas éigeantach.

The aim of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme is to provide one year of high quality funded preschool education, in the year before compulsory education, for every child whose parents wish it.

The admissions process to preschool settings in respect of the 2009/10 school year is still ongoing. Under the arrangements for September 2009 Admissions, the initial process of admissions was completed on 1st May 2009, when parents received a letter notifying them of the setting for which their preschool child has been accepted.

Parents of preschool aged children unplaced in settings of their choice at 1st May 2009, were advised where alternative provision is still available.

Education and Library Boards are now going through the re-allocation of places process for those children who were not placed at 1st May 2009. It is expected that this process will be completed by mid to end June.

Post-Primary Transfer: Consultation

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Education what meetings she has had with post-primary school principals in her consultation on proposals for post-primary transfer published on 15 May 2008. (AQO 2787/09)

The Minister of Education: In the period between my 4 December 2007 statement outlining a long term vision for post-primary education and the bringing forward of consensual proposals for transfer 2010 on 15 May 2008, and as part of an extensive round of meetings with education partners, I met with bodies that represent the views of post-primary school principals from all sectors, including all the teaching unions. I also met with individual principals of controlled grammar schools for whom there is no dedicated representative body.

In the period following 15 May 2008, and prior to the decision to move forward on the basis of transfer 2010 guidance announced on 2 February 2009, I hosted dinners dedicated to this issue with post-primary principals in Enniskillen, Newcastle, Newry, Limavady, Ballymena, Cookstown and Derry.

Thug mé cuairteanna ar scoileanna i ngach earnáil, ghlac mé páirt i gcruinnithe poiblí ar fud an tuaiscirt, agus bhí cruinnithe agam le comhpháirtithe eile oideachais lena n-áiríodh na ceardchumann ar fad a léirigh tuairimí ghairm na múinteoireachta.

I have also visited schools across all sectors, participated in public meetings throughout the north, and held meetings with other education partners including all the unions representing the views of the teaching profession.

School Transport

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Education how much money is spent annually on transporting pupils to Grammar Schools under the School Transport scheme; and how this compares to Great Britain and the Irish Republic. (AQO 2788/09)

The Minister of Education: Sa bhliain dhá mhíle is a seacht / dhá mhíle is a hocht (2007/08), caitheadh seacht deag ponc a naoi milliún (£17.9m) ar iompar daltaí chuig Scoileanna Ghramadaí Dheonacha faoi Shocrúithe Iompair ó Bhaile go Scoil.

In the 2007/08 year a total of £17.9 million was spent transporting pupils to Voluntary Grammar Schools under the Home to School Transport arrangements. The total cost of transporting all pupils was £67.2 million. Pupils at Voluntary Grammar Schools compose roughly one third of all pupils funded for home to school transport.

The Department does not hold separate figures in relation to Controlled Grammar Schools, nor for pupils attending Grammar schools in England, Scotland and Wales. An exercise to obtain data for England, Scotland and Wales would result in disproportionate cost. There are no Grammar Schools in the South of Ireland comparable to those in the North.

Specialist Schools

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, in relation to her announcement of 22 April 2009 about specialist school funding, why four of the schools awarded funding were non-STEM schools. (AQO 2789/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá mé sásta go raibh mé ábalta cistiú a thabhairt, cé gur cistiú ar leibhéal níos lú a bhí i gceist, ní amháin do dhá nó do thrí scoil speisialaithe STEM ach don deich scoil ar fad, na ceithre scoil speisialaithe neamhSTEM san áireamh, a d'aithin an painéal neamhspleách gur chomhlíon na scoileanna sin na critéir ar fad.

I am pleased that I have been able to fund, albeit at a reduced level, not just two or three STEM specialist schools but all ten schools including 4 non STEM specialists, that the Independent panel identified as having met all the criteria.

Following my budget announcement in March 2009, I indicated that funding was available from within the Innovation Fund for a very small number of schools with lead specialisms in STEM related subjects. However I indicated that I wished to look at options when the outcome of the assessment process was known and asked that all 20 Specialist Schools applications were assessed to allow for decisions to be made. Following a rigorous assessment by the Independent Panel, ten schools were identified as meeting the criteria required for designation. Six of these had STEM-related specialisms, with the remaining four having specialisms in other areas.

In recognition of the work that schools had put into the preparation of applications and following extensive representations from schools and their partner schools. I am pleased that we have been able to arrive at a workable solution that has been welcomed by the ten schools.

I have also decided that the designation under the current arrangements for all specialist schools will end in August 2011. I believe this is a good time to review the Specialist Schools model and have asked for work to be carried out to identify how best to build on the strengths of the specialist schools programme while also introducing a clearer focus on inclusion and on sharing best practice in a way that can contribute more directly to my wider reform programme.

School Selection Criteria

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education what advice the Equality Commission has provided in relation to her selection criteria guidance. (AQO 2790/09)

The Minister of Education: Is féidir an freagra iomlán a bhí ag an Coimisiún um Chomhionannas, maidir le comhairliúchán na Roinne Oideachais ar Threoir an Aistrithe 2010, a fheiceáil ar láithreán gréasáin an Choimisiúin.

The Equality Commission's response to the Department of Education's consultation on transfer 2010 guidance can be viewed in full on the Commission's website.

The response includes the following conclusion - "The Commission welcomes the guidance document and that a number of the Commission's previous recommendations have been incorporated. We recommend that the Department has the appropriate structures in place to support the effective implementation of these arrangements."

DEPARTMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Credit Cards

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) how many credit cards have been issued to his Department's staff for work purposes; and (ii) in relation to punitive bank charges on these cards, (a) how many have there been; (b) the total cost of the charges; and (c) the reasons for the charges, in each of the last five years. (AQW 7670/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The Department for Employment and Learning currently has five Government Visa Procurement cards.

There are no bank charges on any of these cards in each of the last five years.

Departmental Spend on Consultants

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much his Department has spent on internal and external consultants, in each of the last three years. (AQW 7836/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning:

| | 2005/06 £m | 2006/07 £m | 2007/08 £m |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Expenditure on External Consultancy | 0.62 | 0.38 | 0.60 |

The 2008/09 accounts have not yet been finalised.

Departmental Consultations

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much his Department spent on (i) Public Notices for consultations in local or regional newspapers; and (ii) other forms of media for consultations, in each of the past three years. (AQW 7854/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning:

- (i) The Department for Employment and Learning has spent a total of £98,405.53 on public notices for consultations in local/regional newspapers over the past three years.

The table below provides a breakdown of this total over the past three years.

PUBLIC NOTICE ADVERTISING

| | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1st April 2006 - 31st March 2007 | £ 50,612.88 |
| 1st April 2007 - 31st March 2008 | £ 24,961.53 |
| 1st April 2008 - 31st March 2009 | £ 22,831.12 |
| Total | £ 98,405.53 |

- (ii) The Department for Employment and Learning also publishes public notices for consultations on the departmental website – www.delni.gov.uk. There is no nominal cost to the department for this.

Apprenticeships

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if his Department will adopt the proposals for a target for apprentices being employed in contracts awarded by government, based on the Westminster proposals for 1000 apprentices. (AQO 2791/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: A Sustainability Task Group, set up under the auspices of the Construction Industry Forum for Northern Ireland has developed 'Proposals for Promoting Equality and Sustainable Development by Sustainable Procurement in Construction'. These proposals, to be included, in so far as it is practicable, in all new public construction contracts from December 2008, require main contractors to recruit one apprentice, either directly or through the supply chain, for each £2m of project value, depending on the nature of the project. In areas of social or economic disadvantage, the Contracting Authority may adjust this target in order to reflect particular social or economic circumstances in relation to a specific target.

My Department will encourage other NI Departments to ensure that all contracts of this scale provide employment opportunities for apprentices. From this my officials will advise on any future specific targets that need to be brought forward. This principal need not apply to construction only but could be applied to all large value public procurements.

University of Ulster: Yorkgate

Mr Maginness asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the proposals of the University of Ulster to transfer courses to a future Yorkgate College Campus. (AQO 2792/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: This is a major proposal that has been put forward by the University of Ulster. The University has submitted an economic appraisal for the capital investment required and that is still under consideration by the economists within my Department. If approved at that stage, the economic appraisal will be submitted to the Department of Finance and Personnel for its approval.

The potential transfer of courses from Jordanstown to the York Street campus would be a matter for the university.

Visteon Workers

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what careers, training and redundancy support his Department has provided to workers at Visteon Ford. (AQO 2796/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: My officials offered to provide an on-site redundancy service to Visteon workers with the Administrator but were unable to gain access to the site. Copies of the DEL leaflet "We can help you back to work" and the addresses of local offices were provided to the employees through the Administrator. A significant number of employees have since been interviewed by Advisers where employment

opportunities, training options, CV preparation and job-search were discussed. Some of these employees have already availed of short accredited courses through Steps to Work and were referred to Careers staff as appropriate.

PhD Students

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what progress has been made on achieving the Programme for Government target of increasing the number of PhD research students by 300 at local universities by 2010. (AQO 2798/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department is on course to achieve this target. The first 100 additional places were filled in Academic Year 2008/09 and the Department has notified the universities of their respective allocations for the second tranche of an additional 100 places in Academic Year 2009/10.

Pathways to Work

Mrs Long asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the extension of the Pathways to Work pilot for lone parents; and whether the pilot is to be extended. (AQO 2800/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Pathways to Work for Lone Parents pilot project ended on 31 March and is currently being evaluated. The financial incentives that were tested by the pilot – the Return to Work Credit of £40 per week and the In Work Emergencies Fund – have already been made available to all lone parents in Northern Ireland. My Department will give due consideration to the evaluation report when it is available and, subject to resource availability, will bring forward additional proposals if necessary.

Training

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what consideration has been given to helping companies, using short-time working, to continue to provide training. (AQO 2801/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The global recession has been keenly felt across Northern Ireland, with significant job losses in numerous industries and many employers placing large numbers of staff on short time working patterns.

My Department recognises that as the training needs of business change, apprentices can often be vulnerable during these difficult economic times. This is why I announced earlier today, details of the 'skillsafe' scheme which my Department is putting in place to address the needs of those apprentices placed on short time working as a result of the recession.

'Skillsafe' will initially be targeted at those apprentices in the manufacturing engineering sector, but will be kept under review with the possibility of rolling the scheme out to other sectors in the future.

From 8th June, my Department will work with employers who have placed one or more of their current apprentices on short time working, and the relevant training organisation, to help fill the apprentice's downtime with accredited training.

In addition to this, my Department will pay the apprentice a training allowance to help offset the reduction in their pay brought about as a result of being placed on short time working.

Stranmillis University College/Queen's University Belfast: Merger

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if, and when, his Department will publish the Business Case submitted by Stranmillis University College in relation to its proposed merger with Queen's University Belfast (AQO 2802/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Business Case is currently being considered by officials in my Department.

The Business Case will be made available to the Assembly's Committee for Employment and Learning once it has received internal approval from my Department, subsequent approval from the Department of Finance and

Personnel and from me, as Minister. If such approvals are given, a series of further steps will then need to be taken, including consultation and both Committee and Assembly scrutiny of any proposed legislation.

Further Education

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what (i) short-term; and (ii) long-term plans he has to ensure that Further Education Colleges collaborate more with the business sector in developing courses to meet their employee skill needs. (AQO 2803/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department has established Workforce Development Forums in each of the six areas served by Further Education Colleges.

Workforce Development Forums are representative of industry and commerce, local government, and other statutory and non-statutory bodies that have a significant interest in ensuring that the colleges meet the skills needs of local business.

Colleges also engage extensively with employer representative bodies, individual companies and Sector Skills Councils (SSC) to identify and address their sectoral as well as company specific skills needs.

An immediate priority for colleges is the provision of customised skills training, and other assistance, to help local businesses deal with the impact of the economic downturn, including the threat of redundancies and short-time working.

Longer term, our revised curriculum policy enables colleges to offer courses and qualifications that will help address the economy's need for a better skilled workforce.

Wage Subsidy

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if his Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment have completed their consideration of a possible wage subsidy or similar scheme; and when the proposals will be published. (AQO 2804/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department has been working closely with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure that any programmes we have been developing complement those of DETI.

As a result, this morning I announced details of my Department's 'Skillsafe' scheme to the Assembly. This scheme is being put in place to address the needs of Apprentices who have been placed on short time working as a result of the recession.

'Skillsafe' will be of benefit to Apprentices in two ways. Firstly, we will fill their down time with accredited training which will contribute towards their Apprenticeship. Secondly, the Department will pay a training allowance which will help offset the reduction in their pay.

This scheme will be available from 8th June and will initially be targeted at those Apprentices who have been placed on short time working patterns within the manufacturing engineering sector.

Visteon Workers

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in light of the recent treatment of workers at the Visteon plant, if he has had any meetings or discussions with the Trade Unions about bringing forward legislation so that workers are protected. (AQO 2805/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Officials meet regularly with the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions to discuss legislative developments.

Under the law employees already have rights and protections, including the right to receive statutory redundancy pay as a minimum. If the employer is unable to make the payment and my Department is satisfied that the requirements specified in Employment Rights legislation have been met, payment will be made by the Department and any monies claimed back from the assets of the business.

Employers proposing to make collective redundancies must complete a consultation period with employee representatives before issuing redundancy notices. Employees are also entitled to a statutory or contractual notice period which takes effect from the date consultation is complete.

Employees who do not feel they have been paid at least the statutory minimum or have not been properly consulted or received adequate notice may make a complaint to an Industrial Tribunal.

There are no plans to bring forward further legislation for the protection of workers in redundancy situations.

Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, following the Public Accounts Committee investigation into £2.5 million debt of the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education in 2006/07, what actions his Department has implemented to alleviate the situation. (AQO 2806/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Since becoming aware of this deficit, my Department has been closely monitoring Belfast Institute which, following merger, now forms part of Belfast Metropolitan College. As a result of that monitoring, the Department raised significant concerns about the College's finances and commissioned an efficiency review to discover the reasons for its deteriorating financial position and make recommendations for improvement.

The review has been completed and the Department will be working closely with the College Governing Body as it takes forward a formal recovery process.

Holylands Stakeholders Forum

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the first meeting of the Holylands Stakeholder Forum on 7 May 2009. (AQO 2807/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: I was very encouraged by the discussions that took place at the Forum on 7 May 2009. As you are aware, the Forum brought together key representatives of various organisations and interested parties to discuss the issues affecting the Holyland area. On the basis of those discussions, a draft report is being produced and circulated to all of the delegates for their consideration. Once the report has been finalised, it is my intention to write to the relevant agencies and organisations, including Executive colleagues, with a view to agreeing a way forward.

Employment: East Antrim

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the changes in the numbers of Job Seeker Allowance claimants and vacancies in the East Antrim constituency, over the last 12 months. (AQO 2808/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: From 1 April 2008 until 31 March 2009, the number of Job Seekers Allowance claimants in East Antrim (Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownabbey Jobs and Benefits Offices) has increased from 1533 to 3091, which represents an increase of just over 100%. During the same period, 2770 vacancies were notified to the three Jobs and Benefits Offices representing a 41% decrease on the previous year's total of 4683.

Employment Services Board: Sainsbury's

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, given the excellent record of the West Belfast Employment Service Board in getting people out of long term unemployment, if the Board was properly involved in planning for the jobs at Andersonstown Sainsburys. (AQO 2809/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: My officials met with the Sainsbury's Human Resources Manager in early March to outline how the Department could support them with recruitment and to inform them of the key community stakeholders in the area. Ultimately it is a matter for Sainsbury's to determine its recruitment policy. Sainsbury's main priority was to interview Curley's staff to establish if they wanted to transfer to employment

with Sainsbury's. When this exercise was complete Sainsbury's agreed to advertise remaining vacancies with the Department. Vacancies were advertised on 1 May. Representatives from the Employment Services Board were kept informed of the recruitment process at various Neighbourhood Partnership meetings.

Economy

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he has met with his counterparts in the Republic of Ireland to discuss their response to the economic downturn. (AQO 2810/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: I met the Tanaiste, Mary Coughlan, on 11 March 2009 and, amongst a number of other issues, discussed actions that we are taking to tackle the economic downturn.

DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Energy from Waste Grant Funding

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much of the £18million Energy from Waste grant funding that was to be issued by April 2008 has been given out; and to whom it has been distributed. (AQW 7432/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): Although April 2008 was the initial target date for the issue of funding to Energy from Waste projects the complexity of the projects necessitated detailed appraisals before approvals could be sought. DETI therefore secured funding in the current Comprehensive Spending Review period to cover the commitments to the Energy from Waste projects and allow them to complete in the 2009-10 and 2010-11 financial years.

Offers totalling £14,771 million have been made to five projects, one of which is a public sector project. No funding has as yet been distributed but as all the promoters are confident that the projects will proceed, the budget remains allocated and committed to the five successful projects.

Of the remaining £3.229 million, £0.43 million was returned to the Northern Ireland block in the 07/08 financial year and £2.8 million was redirected to the Reconnect programme to increase its budget to £10.8 million during the 08/09 financial year.

Public Procurement Contracts

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the companies that were successful in securing public procurement contracts in works, services and goods through the Department, in the last two years and the percentage of those that were from the SME or the Social Economy sectors. (AQW 7436/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Companies that were successful in securing public procurement contracts in 2007-08 and 2008-09 in works, services and goods are listed at Annex A.

The percentage of companies from SME or the Social Economy sectors is as follows: -

ANNEX A

| 2008-09 83% | 2007-08 85% |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| 2008/09 Financial Year | 2007/08 Financial Year |
| Company | Company |
| A4e | A&L Goodbody |
| Abacus Recruitment Agency | Actica Consulting |
| Abbey Court Hotel | AEA Energy & Environment |

| 2008-09 83% | 2007-08 85% |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 2008/09 Financial Year | 2007/08 Financial Year |
| Company | Company |
| Agri Foods BioSciences Institute | Alan Dunlop |
| Alan Britten | Albert McKeaveney |
| Ana McColgan | Anderson Spratt |
| Analysys Mason | Ann Gorman Marketing |
| Angelena Boden | Anne Faux Accountants |
| Arco Ltd | Apparitum |
| ASM Horwath | Arco Ltd |
| Atkins | Arthur Cox |
| AV Browne | Arthur D Little |
| Avanti | ASA Marketing |
| Baker, Tilly, Mooney Moore | ASM Horwath |
| Banner Business Supplies Ltd | Atlas Communications |
| BDO Stoy Hayward | Banner Business Office Supplies |
| Beers Consulting | Barklie & Logan |
| Bel-Air Refrigeration | BDO Stoy Hayward |
| BGS GSNI | Beamish Associates International |
| BHA Consulting | Bearing Point |
| Bigger & Strahan | Belfast City Council |
| BJM Chartered Accountants | Blackbox Marketing |
| BOC | Brian Dynes |
| Brian Morrison | Brian Mackey |
| Brilliant Red | Brian McKee |
| Broadmind | Brigid Duggan Consultants |
| Bryson Charitable Group | CA Promotions |
| BTS Solutions | Cambridge Econometrics |
| Business Consulting UK Ltd | Campbell & Caher |
| CA Promotions | Carson McDowell |
| Centre for Competitiveness | Centre for Competitiveness |
| Champion Exposition Services | Circle Exhibitions |
| Ciber UK Ltd | Citizens Advice Bureau |
| Citizens Advice Bureau | Claredon Executive |
| Clare Veterinary Clinic | Clear Direction |
| Cobweb Information Ltd | Clearwater Consulting |
| Central Office of Information | Cleaver Fulton Rankin |
| Commendium Ltd | Colin Jackson |
| Commercial Graphics | Computacentre |
| Copytext | Copytext |

| 2008-09 83% | 2007-08 85% |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 2008/09 Financial Year | 2007/08 Financial Year |
| Company | Company |
| David Cordiner Photography | Coventry University |
| Dawson Hinds Ltd | Create |
| DC Ives | Crown Records |
| Deloitte | D5 Consulting |
| Dennison Commercials Ltd | David Brew Consulting |
| DHA Consulting | David Woodhead |
| Diamond Recruitment Agency | DBA (Des Bingham Associates Ltd) |
| Direct News | Deloitte |
| Duffy Lafferty Communications | Denton Wilde Sapte |
| Dun & Bradstreet Ltd | DesignCo |
| DWCL Group | Dimension |
| Ecofys | Disability Action |
| Editorial Solutions | Douglas Mgt Consultancy |
| EG Consulting | DSGI |
| Electro Industries | Duke Consulting |
| Element Consulting | Duncan Consulting |
| Energy Footprint | East Belfast Enterprise |
| Envision | Ecom Software Ltd |
| Equanet | Edgecumbe Catering Services Ltd |
| Ernst & Young | EG Information Consulting |
| Esynergy | Envision Management Consultants |
| Ethos | Ernst & Young |
| Event Exhibition & Display | Ethos Information Solutions |
| Eventful Consultancy | European Business Link |
| Excite Exhibition & Display | Event |
| Exclaim | Exclaim |
| Expertise | EYE (Advertising) |
| EYE (Advertising) | Food from Britain |
| Faber Maunsell | Forth Data Management |
| FGS McClure Watters | FR Kelly |
| Financial Times | Full Circle |
| Fire IMC | Gaia Marketing & Design |
| Flex Language Services | Gareth Jones |
| Focus Management Consultancy | Goldblatt McGuigan |
| Food from Britain France | GPS Colour Graphics |
| Forde May Consulting | Handel Exporting |
| FPM Accountants | Happening |

| 2008-09 83% | 2007-08 85% |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 2008/09 Financial Year | 2007/08 Financial Year |
| Company | Company |
| FR Kelly | HELM Corporation |
| Full Circle | Heron Consulting |
| FuturoFirma | Hertz Lease |
| G2 Environmental Services Ltd | Hillsborough Consultancy |
| Genesis | HMC Global |
| Geological Survey of Ireland | Hopkirk and Russ |
| Geosystem Srl | Hutchinson Mgt Consultancy |
| Gilmartin Consulting | IFF Research |
| Gilmore Signs | IMS |
| Global Connect | Insight Business Services |
| Goldblatt McGuigan | Inspired eBusiness Solutions |
| Google | Ipsos Mori |
| GPS Colour Graphics Ltd | Iris Colour |
| Grant Thornton | Iron Mountain |
| Hallmark Solutions | Jack Patterson |
| Handel Export Consulting | James Burke |
| Hanna Thompson | Jenkinson Consulting |
| Harbinson Mulholland | Jeris Associates |
| Harrison Management Consulting Ltd | Joe Doherty & Associates |
| Harrison Photography | John Boggs |
| Helix Innovation Partnerships Ltd | John Bradley |
| Heron | John McQuillan Contracts |
| Hewlett-Packard | John Orsi |
| Hutchinson | Johnston Printing |
| Hyder Consulting | Jones & Cassidy |
| IFF Research | Kappa Consulting |
| Innotec | Keith Charlton |
| Inspired | Ken McElwaine |
| Ipsos Mori | Kerr Consulting |
| ISL Ltd | KPMG |
| J.A. McClelland & Sons (Aucts) Ltd | Kremer |
| Jackson Mullan | KTS Consultants |
| James Deeny | L'Strange & Brett |
| John McVeigh | Lacey Consultancy |
| John P Hanna | Linkubator |
| John Sheridan & Sons Ltd | Louise Corken |
| Ken Morrison Consulting | MA Consulting |

| 2008-09 83% | 2007-08 85% |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 2008/09 Financial Year | 2007/08 Financial Year |
| Company | Company |
| Ker Graphics | MacMillan Media |
| Kiang | MacNeill Consultancy |
| KPMG | Maeflower Consulting Private Ltd |
| Kremer Consulting | Marcom |
| Lagan Technologies Ltd | Marie-Claire Houston |
| Lake consulting Ltd | Marketise |
| Lansdowne Market Research | Marlagh |
| Lewis Communications Private Ltd | MaST |
| Linkubator | Matthews |
| Locum Consulting | Max Branding |
| Lord Europ | MCA Consulting |
| M Barrett | McClure Watters |
| Mabbett & Associates | McConnells |
| Marsh | McGrigors LLP |
| Marshall Addidle | Mentec |
| MaST | Michael Cooper |
| Matthews Business Consulting | Michael Morrow Marketing |
| McAdam Design/Ecovision | Mick McAteer |
| McCadden Creative | Millward Brown |
| McCann Consulting | Mooney Media |
| McClure Watters | Moran Consulting |
| MCI UK | Mount Charles Catering |
| McKinsey & Co | MPD International |
| Mediatrack Research | NI Technology Centre (QUB) |
| Meltem | Nicola Brown Associates |
| MERC | North West Marketing Ltd |
| Michael Cooper Photography | Northern Ireland Media Monitoring |
| Michael Gallagher | Northern Whig Ltd |
| Millward Brown Ulster | OCO Consulting |
| Morrow Communications | Oliver Wyman Actuarial Consulting |
| MS BIS | Oswald Cross |
| Neueda | PA Consulting Ltd |
| NI Technology Centre QUB | Parker Butler |
| NIMMS | Parsons Brinkerhoff |
| NISP | Partiy |
| North Time & Data | Perceptive Insight |
| North West Marketing | Platinum Expo |

| 2008-09 83% | 2007-08 85% |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 2008/09 Financial Year | 2007/08 Financial Year |
| Company | Company |
| Northern Innovation | Prof Andrew Scott |
| Northern Ireland Media Monitoring | Prof D Storey |
| OCO Consulting | Prof L Stevenson |
| Orchardville | Prof Mark Hart |
| Over Arup | PWC |
| Oxera | R W Pierce |
| PA Consulting | Regional Forecasts |
| Pan Leisure | Resource TM |
| Parker Butler | RMK Associates |
| PDC Consulting | Robert Reid |
| Perceptive Insight Market Research | Roger Frampton |
| Pierce Communications | Saffron Brand |
| PLB Projects Ltd | Sax Ltd |
| Poyry Energy | SB Associates |
| Pragmatique Ltd | SCM |
| Press Eye Ltd | Singularity |
| Prof Mark Hart | Sita UK |
| Progressive Associates | SMB Golf |
| PWC | Sopra |
| Quadra | Sopra Newell & Budge |
| Quadriga Consulting | SPA Consulting |
| QUB | SQW Ltd |
| Ransted Recruitment Agency | Stormont Hotel |
| Ream Ltd | Stratagem |
| Renewable Building | StreamOn.net |
| Resource TM | Sunesis |
| RPS Consulting | Terry Stevens |
| Sage UK | TES Business Consultants |
| Sam Butler | The Analysis Bureau |
| Serco Integrated Services | The Charm Company |
| Shauna Magill Associates | The Rural College, Derrynoid |
| Sita UK | TIME Associates |
| Sopra Group | TNS Travel & Toursim |
| Stormont Hotel | Tom McAvoy |
| Strategem Ireland Limited | Trade and Commerce |
| Strathclyde University | Tranzformix |
| Sweet & Maxwell | Tughans |

| 2008-09 83% | 2007-08 85% |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 2008/09 Financial Year | 2007/08 Financial Year |
| Company | Company |
| TDP Advertising | Turkington Technology |
| Team | Ulster Exhibition |
| Templeton Hotel | W5 Ltd |
| Terry McCaughey | Weber Shandwick |
| The Analysis Bureau | Western Connect |
| The Jessop Group Ltd | Whitenoise |
| The Right Solution | Whitewater Consulting |
| The Stanley Motor Works (1932) Ltd | William Balmer |
| Thinking Place | William McKay |
| TNS Millward brown | William Stewart |
| Tony Pleavin | Windsor Photoprints |
| Tribal Helm | Xerox |
| TTC | |
| TTC International | |
| Turkington | |
| Ursula Lindsay | |
| Visual Access | |
| Waterman Sustainable | |
| WCS Consultants | |
| White Young Green | |
| Wilden Management Services | |
| Xcel Signs | |
| Xerox | |
| YTKO | |

Departmental Land

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment when the most recent audit of departmental land was undertaken; and how much unused land the Department currently holds. (AQW 7731/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI holds land exclusively for the use of client companies with an approved business case and a demonstrable immediate property need. Its total landholding amounts to 2776 acres of which 758 acres remain available for Invest NI client company projects.

Invest NI's landholding is kept under continual review as per public sector best practice. This is to ensure that any property deemed as surplus is released with the least possible delay, subject to the need to realise full value for the Exchequer.

The most recent audit of Invest NI's property portfolio was carried out by the organisation in April 2009 and it identified that it had no surplus landholding.

Departmental Consultations

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much her Department spent on (i) Public Notices for consultations in local or regional newspapers; and (ii) other forms of media for consultations, in each of the past three years. (AQW 7857/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Information on DETI spend on consultation in each of the past three years is set out in the attached tables.

(i) Public Notices for consultations in local or regional newspapers;

| DETI (including NDPBs) | 2006-2007 | 2007-2008 | 2008-2009 |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Total | £12,608 | £24,235 | £13,483 |

(ii) Other forms of media for consultations;

| DETI (including NDPBs) | 2006-2007 | 2007-2008 | 2008-2009 |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Total | £ 0 | £ 0 | £0 |

Project Kelvin

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the Derry Telehouse will be connected to the Project Kelvin network by at least three separate cable routes. (AQW 7874/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Hibernia Atlantic is continuing with the work associated with the submission of a change request to the Project Kelvin contract which will propose a new location for the Telehouse in Londonderry. Until the exact location is known, details of how the Telehouse will be connected to Hibernia's network cannot be finalised.

The contract for the project specifies that it must operate on an open access, carrier neutral basis. As a result any telecommunications company can, if they choose, connect their networks to any of the project's Points of Presence including the Telehouse. As BT, Eircom, Ntl, Bytel and other telecommunications companies have networks in Londonderry, the Telehouse could be connected to multiple networks if there is a commercial reason to do this.

Tourism

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what analysis her Department has carried out on how the main tourist attractions could be better promoted. (AQO 2813/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Northern Ireland Tourism Signature Projects and other key attractions in Northern Ireland are featured extensively in Tourism Ireland's suite of publications which are distributed to potential visitors in markets across the world. They are also well represented throughout Tourism Ireland's suite of 41 websites in 19 languages. These provide access to over 30,000 records on things to do and see, places to stay and information of interest to overseas visitors and which attract over 10 million unique visitors a year.

NITB has also recently developed a brand strategy for Northern Ireland tourism. The brand aims to create the new Northern Ireland experience and get it on everyone's destination wishlist. The brand identified 2 themes that articulate what Northern Ireland has to offer that no one else can offer. The themes are "Experience Our Awakening" and "Uncover our Stories". The latter provides the direction to promote our unique attractions.

NITB has also recently delivered an advertising campaign in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland promoting the unique tourism assets that Northern Ireland has, that cannot be experienced in any other destination.

NITB is seeking to exploit the Sterling/Euro exchange rate advantage by driving home the message that Northern Ireland is a great destination to visit, is easily accessible and offers good value for money.

Invest NI: West Tyrone

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the efforts of Invest NI to secure inward investment in the West Tyrone constituency in the last five years. (AQO 2818/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI promotes all of Northern Ireland as an attractive and viable location which is capable of providing solutions to the business needs of potential inward investors.

Invest NI does not determine the locations chosen for potential investor visits or the final locations for investment projects. However, the agency does work closely with each company when preparing a draft visit programme. This is to ensure that the locations to be visited meet the company's needs and maximise the opportunity to sell the Northern Ireland proposition.

From April 2002 to March 2008, Invest NI facilitated 18 inward visits by potential investors to the West Tyrone Parliamentary Constituency area. These visits provide the means for potential investors to assess the opportunities and benefits of locating their businesses within Northern Ireland.

In the last five years, Invest NI has supported nine Foreign Direct Investment projects in the West Tyrone constituency. These projects plan to promote 328 new jobs and will result in £34 million of investment in the constituency.

Project Kelvin, scheduled for completion in 2009, will deliver points of presence in Strabane and Omagh, offering businesses access to direct international connectivity services at prices which are consistent across all of Northern Ireland.

Caravans

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she is aware of the high sales of mobile caravans in the last year; and what plans she has to provide for an increase in, or to encourage other providers to increase, the number of caravan sites. (AQO 2819/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: There are no specific statistics available for Northern Ireland. The National Caravan Council, the trade association that represents the UK caravan industry, reports that sales of new touring caravans across the UK fell in 2008 by 16 per cent. Trade sales of caravan holiday homes fell by 22 per cent in the same period. There are no statistics for sales in individual regions. However, sales of pre-owned touring caravans were very healthy during 2008 and the first quarter of 2009, meaning that the industry has held up comparatively well in the economic crisis.

NITB has previously provided funding support for the development of the touring sector. Decisions as to the further development of sites must be taken by the developers having regard to the market conditions.

Debt Relief Scheme

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what consideration she has given to fast tracking the proposed debt relief scheme. (AQO 2820/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In a previous answer given on 16 March 2009 I indicated that my Department would give full consideration to the outcome of the consultation process before considering further whether there was a case for fast-tracking. My officials are due to brief the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee about the outcome on 28 May 2009. It would therefore be premature for me to make any decision about fast-tracking before I have taken account of the Committee's views.

It will be possible to opt for accelerated passage at any time up to two weeks before a Bill is introduced. Subject to the Executive's agreement, I plan to introduce the Bill to set up the Debt Relief scheme no later than June 2010.

Natural Gas: Licensing

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans are being developed to increase licences to supply natural gas. (AQO 2821/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Five companies, in addition to Phoenix Natural Gas, have acquired licences to supply natural gas in the Greater Belfast and Larne licenced area, since the Belfast gas market has been fully open to competition, from 1 January 2007. The Department and the Utility Regulator continue to encourage gas supply licence applications within this licenced area, and believe that competition between supply companies will result in customer switching, particularly if dual fuel offers (both gas and electricity supply) emerge from the market.

Matrix Report

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide an update on the Matrix Report. (AQO 2822/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am pleased to report that considerable progress towards the implementation of the MATRIX Panel's recommendations has already been made. Some measure of MATRIX success is that this has been driven by the business community; supported and facilitated by my Department and by Invest NI.

Several of the Businesses engaged in the MATRIX and Horizon Process are now actively forming the kind of Industry-led Innovation Communities which MATRIX recommends.

It is very pleasing to see that, even in these difficult times, the work of MATRIX has helped to secure existing jobs and create new employment. Independent analysis, undertaken by PA Consulting, has found that 330 new jobs have already been created and a further 300 have been safeguarded directly as a result of companies coming together to work in the MATRIX innovation community model! I am confident that this is only the beginning of what can be achieved as the MATRIX recommendations are progressively implemented in the months ahead.

In addition, since the launch of the MATRIX Report, my Executive Colleagues and I have established an inter-departmental group of senior officials, comprising DETI, Invest NI, DEL, DARD, DOE, DHSSPS and DFP. This has been tasked with the development of a detailed and coordinated cross-government response to the MATRIX' findings and recommendations. I expect to receive a report from this group by the summer.

It is also clear that Invest NI has made very good progress in quickly taking on board emerging findings from MATRIX. This is evidenced by its new Competence Centres Call; the new R&D Grant Scheme; the new IP Assistance Programme; and in particular the role which the Collaborative Networks Team is playing in facilitating the Industry-led Innovation Communities emerging from MATRIX.

Employment: Sustainable Energy

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to create jobs in sustainable energy. (AQO 2823/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The growth of the sustainable energy sector presents many opportunities for Northern Ireland businesses involved in the design, installation or manufacture of the component parts associated with a range of renewable energy technologies.

In recognition of this, Invest NI has allocated resources to identify business opportunities in the renewables sector and to build awareness of these within local industry.

Increasing the amount of energy generated from renewable sources will not only help to create employment in the generation sector, but also provide greater confidence to those companies that are considering entering the sustainable energy supply chain.

An Invest NI strategy for the renewables sector is also under development. This will promote and stimulate the uptake, by Northern Ireland businesses, of the opportunities that are rapidly unfolding.

On 13 May 2009, Invest NI hosted a seminar and workshop on business opportunities in the renewables sector. At this, it launched a series of DVDs that promote Northern Ireland's capability in the sector.

Invest NI is actively engaged with the Department of Energy and Climate Change's Renewable Energy Forum and the UK Renewables Deployment Group in targeting of renewables as a growth sector.

Now is the right time to encourage investment in renewable energy technologies for the future. My Department will shortly be consulting on a new Strategic Energy Framework. This will highlight how renewable

energy technologies can help deliver security of supply, address climate change and create local employment opportunities.

Furthermore, the recently established Inter-departmental Working Group on sustainable Energy, which I chair, has agreed to set up a sub-group looking specifically at opportunities for 'green jobs' and skills development within Northern Ireland.

Invest NI

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline Invest NI's strategy for attracting investment during the economic downturn. (AQO 2824/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI's efforts remain focused on securing both new foreign direct and locally owned investment whilst providing support to assist its existing clients to undertake new investment projects and pursue a wide range of value-added activities.

Whilst the forward pipeline of clients' planned investments has reduced as a result of the economic climate, Invest NI continues to focus its efforts on those markets and sectors that offer the best prospects for securing new foreign direct investment for Northern Ireland.

Although short-term prospects remain challenging, Invest NI has also put in place a range of tailored support to help its clients to survive in the current market. In September 2008, I launched the £5 million Accelerated Support Fund and I will shortly be announcing details of a new short-term aid scheme. This will provide eligible businesses with financial assistance to enable them to plan and, where necessary, restructure for the future, while maintaining significant employment and retaining key staff so they are ready to take advantage of an economic upturn.

My Department is engaged in ongoing discussions to consider what further we can do 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 to tackle the economic downturn that were announced by the Executive in December. Additionally, £1.2 billion of public sector construction schemes are currently on site.

In my capacity as Chair of the Economic Development Forum, I have also established a number of sub-groups, led by the private sector, to consider what additional measures I and my Executive colleagues could take.

Republic of Ireland Employees

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if a record is kept of persons employed in Northern Ireland whose addresses are in the Republic of Ireland; and what steps the Minister proposes to ensure that such data is collected and available. (AQO 2825/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment does not currently collect information on persons employed in Northern Ireland whose addresses are in the Republic of Ireland.

Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs holds address information on persons employed who could be liable to UK income tax under Pay As You Earn and self assessment. This includes residents of the Republic of Ireland. The Department does not therefore propose to collect such information.

Renewable Energy

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment has been made of the likely UK targets for renewable energy production, resulting from the recent European Union Council of Ministers target of 20% for the EU; and how targets will be attributed across heating, transport and electricity production. (AQO 2826/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The EU is giving effect to the 20% target for renewable energy consumption through the Renewable Energy Directive, which was formally agreed earlier this year, and which sets the UK a binding target of 15% renewable energy by 2020.

The UK Government will publish a Renewable Energy Strategy this summer. This will set out measures to meet the target and DETI will contribute to this. The Strategy will include scenarios for the distribution of effort between sectors, but will not set targets for sectoral shares. In the transport sector, the Directive includes a binding 10% share for renewable energy in transport in each Member State, subject to sustainability.

In the Government's Renewable Energy Strategy consultation in summer 2008, the UK proposed a scenario of 32% renewables in electricity; 14% in heat; and 10% in transport. DECC is currently updating its analysis of the costs and benefits of measures to deliver the overall target, and this central scenario will be updated in the final RES.

In NI, DETI will shortly be publishing a revised Strategic Energy Framework for consultation. It will set out proposals for a renewable electricity target to 2020, and for an interim renewable heat target to 2020, the latter to be confirmed after further work in this area.

Natural Gas Pipeline

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans her Department has to expand the existing gas pipeline so that people living west of the Bann have equality of opportunity to access natural gas. (AQO 2827/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department, in conjunction with the Utility Regulator, is in the process of commissioning a study to determine the technical and economic feasibility of bringing gas to towns in the west and north-west of Northern Ireland. The towns under consideration will include Magherafelt, Cookstown, Dungannon, Strabane, Omagh, and Enniskillen. It is planned to appoint consultants in July and have a report by the end of 2009.

Investment: Indigenous Companies

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much money was allocated to indigenous companies for the first quarter of last year; and the projected allocation for the first quarter of this year. (AQO 2828/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI does not allocate its budget between indigenous or Foreign Direct Investment projects. Instead, the agency operates a number of programmes, the outputs from which are designed to deliver the agency's wide range of Corporate Plan targets.

Data for the first quarter of the 2008 calendar year shows that Invest NI issued offers to 533 indigenous companies. This amounted to total assistance of £22.4 million, leading to planned investment of £84.5 million.

Data for activity during the first three months of 2009 indicates that Invest NI issued 689 offers of assistance to indigenous companies, amounting to £14.6 million worth of assistance and generating potential total investment of £71.9 million.

Efficiency Savings: DETI

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail her Department's efficiency savings in the last two financial years. (AQO 2829/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DETI delivered efficiency savings of £27.5 million and £8.2 million for the years 2007/08 and 2008/09 against targets of £6.2 million and £8.2 million.

The savings are broken down by budget category in the table below.

| £ million | Admin. | Resource | Non Resource | Total |
|--------------|------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| 2007/08 | 1.0 | 22.3 | 4.2 | 27.5 |
| 2008/09 | 0.6 | 7.6 | 0 | 8.2 |
| Total | 1.6 | 29.9 | 4.2 | 35.7 |

Administration and Resource savings release cash. Non Resource efficiency savings do not release cash but improve services.

Renewable Energy: Public Transport

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether there have been discussions with the Department for Regional Development about the implications for public transport arising from the decision to set European Union targets for renewable energy across all areas of energy consumption.

(AQO 2830/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The EU is giving effect to the 20% target for renewable energy consumption through the Renewable Energy Directive, which is expected to be published shortly. The proposals indicate that the UK's target will be a requirement for 15% of final energy consumption (across electricity, heat and transport) to be from renewable sources. DETI officials have met DRD officials to discuss the Directive and the full range of implications for transport. Officials plan to meet again once the Directive is published.

In addition, DRD is represented on the Sustainable Energy Inter-departmental Working Group which I chair and the group will consider the implications of the Directive when it is published.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Irish Hare

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment if he will consider amending the Wildlife Order to make hare coursing illegal and to give the Irish hare full protection.

(AQW 7694/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Wilson): The Wildlife Order consultation exercise considered the long term protection requirements for the Irish Hare for conservation purposes. Based on population trends from independent surveys and responses from the consultation exercise, I have no plans to amend existing statutory provisions.

A ban on hare coursing is not within the remit of the Wildlife Order, which is primarily for conservation purposes. I, therefore, intend to write to my DARD colleague on the subject.

Departmental Land

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of the Environment when the most recent audit of departmental land was undertaken; and how much unused land the Department currently holds.

(AQW 7732/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The most recent audit of departmental land was undertaken on land owned by my Department's Environment and Heritage Service (Now the Northern Ireland Environment Agency) between October and December 2007. I can also confirm that my Department currently holds 10.36 hectares of unused land.

Cyclists

Mrs Long asked the Minister of the Environment if he would consider legislation to make wearing helmets compulsory for cyclists.

(AQW 7741/09)

The Minister of the Environment: To date the Department has not given formal consideration to making the wearing of cycle helmets mandatory. Rather, and based on the research evidence currently available, the Department's policy is to advise and encourage all cyclists to wear approved helmets. The Department for Transport has recently commissioned further research into cycling safety including a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of cycling helmets. It is hoped that the outcome of this work will help to inform DOE's future policy direction on this issue in a way that will keep cyclists safe and is acceptable to all interested parties. Cyclists'

safety will also form part of the considerations of the Department in arriving at a new road safety strategy for Northern Ireland to be published in 2010.

Planning Applications

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if he would consider including discussions with architects and/or applicants prior to any planning applications being brought to local councils with an opinion to approve, in order to cut down on the amount of deferrals for new plans. (AQW 7750/09)

The Minister of the Environment: When all stages of the development management process are completed a Schedule of Applications to be presented to the council for consultation is sent by my Department prior to the meeting. This includes application reference, my Department's opinion, applicant and location details and description of development. The official attending the council meeting will also have access to the application files. My Department regularly engages with individual councillors, architects and/or applicants as part of the development management process before an application is included on the council schedule and is committed to giving a transparent service to all interested parties involved in this process. The public have the right to inspect the application file through my Department's open files procedures. Applicants, agents and objectors use this facility on a regular basis to track progress on applications. The Good Practice Guide, which I intend to launch on 18 June, encourages planning officers to engage pro-actively with applicants and agents in order to agree amendments to schemes, if possible, before council is consulted.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what targets have been set for the Northern Ireland Environment Agency in relation to response times for water pollution incidents. (AQW 7751/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is responsible for investigating reports of pollution affecting ground or surface waters.

NIEA estimates the environmental impact that a pollutant has on a watercourse using the pollution incident assessment criteria, attached at Annex A, and assigns a likely incident severity. The NIEA target for staff to assess and estimate the incident severity and forward the incident details to field staff for investigation is within 30 minutes of the report being received.

The target for field staff to respond to incidents is:

- a. High or Medium Severity, within 2 hrs (reported during normal working hours)
- b. High or Medium Severity, within 4 hrs (reported outside normal working hours) and
- c. Low Severity incidents, within 1 working day.

Annex A

Pollution incident impact assessment criteria.

High Severity

A major incident involving one or more of the following:

- a. potential or actual persistent effect on water quality or aquatic life;
- b. closure of potable water, industrial or agricultural abstraction if necessary;
- c. extensive fish kill;
- d. excessive breaches of consent conditions;
- e. extensive remedial measures necessary;
- f. major effect on amenity value.

Medium Severity

A significant pollution incident involving one or more of the following:

- a. notification to abstractors necessary;
- b. significant fish kill;
- c. measurable effect on invertebrate life;
- d. water unfit for stock;
- e. bed of watercourse contaminated;
- f. amenity value to the public, owners or users reduced by odour or appearance.

Low Severity

A minor incident resulting in localised environmental impact only. Some of the following may apply:

- a. notification to abstractors not necessary;
- b. fish kill of fewer than 10 fish (species of no particular importance to the affected water);
- c. no readily observable effect on invertebrate life;
- d. water unfit for stock;
- e. bed of watercourse only locally contaminated;
- f. minimal environmental impact and amenity only marginally affected.

Unsubstantiated

A reported pollution incident which, on investigation, proves to be unsubstantiated, i.e. no evidence can be found of a pollution incident having occurred.

Road Safety

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment to provide details of the Road Safety issues that were discussed at the recent North/South Ministerial Council. (AQW 7768/09)

The Minister of the Environment: At the NSMC transport sectoral in Larne on 3 April 2009 Ministers noted that the road safety statistics for 2008 from both sides of the border had been the best since records began. However, it was also noted that both Northern Ireland and the Republic still lagged some way behind the best-performing countries in Europe and that there could therefore be no let-up in our efforts to maintain progress.

We noted the progress made towards achieving mutual recognition of driving disqualifications between the UK and Ireland, and agreed to the development of a project plan for achieving mutual recognition of penalty points.

We discussed the continuing level of cooperation on advertising, and agreed to further coordination of efforts to utilise new technology for advertising and publicity purposes.

We agreed that progress on developing and delivering a strategic approach to improving road safety on both sides of the border should continue, and that results of current and planned research projects should be shared.

We also agreed to give further consideration to the question of developing a coordinated approach to drink drive limits.

Planning Legislation

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment if it is possible under planning legislation to convert a showroom into a community use leisure complex; and to explain the process. (AQW 7775/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Under Article 11 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 development management extends not only to buildings, engineering, mining or other operations, but also to the making of any material change in the use of any buildings or other land.

The Planning (Use Classes) Order (Northern Ireland) 2004 defines similar group of uses (or classes) of land and buildings. The Use Classes Order provides a legal mechanism whereby broadly similar changes of use do not require planning permission. However, planning permission will be required for a change of use from a showroom to a community use leisure complex.

Where an application is made for a change of use, my Department in dealing with the application shall assess the proposal against all relevant planning policies and any other material considerations such as letters of objection / support and comments of consultees. As part of the determination of a planning application for a change of use my Department will consider all factors and make a balanced judgement based on the individual merits of the case.

Planning Policy Statement 8

Dr Farry asked the Minister of the Environment whether jobs and economic development will now be considered “a community benefit” under Planning Policy Statement 8. (AQW 7783/09)

The Minister of the Environment: This is a matter which can only be properly assessed on a case by case basis.

Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985

Mrs Long asked the Minister of the Environment how many offenders have been prosecuted under the terms of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 for taking, damaging or destroying the nests of any wild bird while the nest is in use or being built. (AQW 7786/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I understand that the PSNI does not keep records of prosecutions taken under the Wildlife Order (Northern Ireland) 1985 for taking, damaging or destroying the nests of any wild birds while the nest is in use or being built.

However, I am aware that in December 2008 a building contractor was convicted in Armagh Magistrates Court of destroying the nest of a wild bird and was fined £200.

Officials in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency regularly give advice to the general public and to arboriculturalists to ensure that damage to nests does not occur.

Protection of Mature Trees

Mrs Long asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 7463/09, whether any sanctions exist to control or monitor tree cutting and hedge trimming during the nesting period in line with guidance from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development; and for an assessment of the benefits of such controls. (AQW 7787/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Under the terms of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 it is an offence to take, damage or destroy the nests of any wild birds while the nest is in use or being built. Any tree cutting or hedge trimming activity carried out during this time that can be proven to have damaged or destroyed a nest is potentially an offence and the PSNI can pursue a prosecution.

If the prosecution is upheld by the court, the Magistrate can levy a fine of up to £5,000 per offence and award costs against the guilty party.

All farmers in receipt of direct agricultural support must ensure that hedge cutting/coppicing or laying is not undertaken between 1 March and 31 August. Hedge cutting between these dates is only permitted where health and safety is an issue, for example roadside hedges. This is to avoid damaging birds, nests or chicks and complies with the Wildlife Order.

Each year farms are inspected to ensure compliance with the above condition. During 2008, 25 financial penalties were applied to Single Farm Payment in respect of either hedge cutting during the bird nesting season or field boundary removal without permission.

Planning Service

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications involving business expansion and job creation which have been with Planning Service and remain undetermined for (i) more than one year; and (ii) more than two years. (AQW 7796/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department does not record this level of detail on the current system of electronic data retrieval – 20/20. To provide accurate figures for the information requested can only be done by a manual search of all our existing files. This information would not be available in the time specified and would incur disproportionate costs.

The time taken to process a planning application to determination will be influenced by whether or not full and adequate information is available to enable such a determination to be made, the complexity of the proposal, and will be subject to compliance with all relevant statutory processes including the consideration of objections/representations and Council input. The onus is clearly on the applicant to ensure that a comprehensive package of supporting information accompanies the planning application. However, my Department has been actively working to reduce the number of planning applications in the system longer than 12 months as required by the Planning Service Business Plan. Annual Development Management Statistics for 2007/2008 show a 13% reduction in planning applications in the system longer than 12 months. The next Annual Statistical Bulletin for 2008/09 is due for publication in October 2009.

I can also advise that Planning Service has introduced an on-line system which allows applicants, agents and the public to track progress of applications through the system from receipt to decision, using the Planning Service web site.

Listed Buildings in Newry

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment how many listed buildings there are in the city of Newry. (AQW 7815/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There are 136 entries on the list for Newry City. It should be noted that some of these entries may relate to multiple properties - such as terraces or large estates - which may feature on the list as a single record. Other entries relate to listed bridges, arches and memorials.

I have attached a copy of the list for Newry City, for ease of reference.

Cairngorms National Park

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the views of farmers during his recent visit to the Cairngorms National Park. (AQW 7827/09)

The Minister of the Environment: During my visit to the Cairngorms, I met two farmers who told me they had had reservations about the prospect of a National Park. However, after they learned more about it they recognised the opportunities and benefits that National Park status offered.

Erosion of the High Mournes

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the steps he is taking to prevent the erosion of the High Mournes, by those damaging the habitat by using quad bikes and trail bikes and if the PSNI has been asked to investigate this. (AQW 7828/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department of the Environment has not directly received any reports of damage caused by quad and trail bikes in the High Mournes since 2005.

I am aware however that the Mourne Mountains are being used by an increasing number of people for recreational activities and that this has created some erosion problems. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is working closely with the District Councils, the National Trust, the Mourne Heritage Trust and others to find appropriate solutions to these problems.

NIEA has for many years supported erosion control projects in the Mourne and has grant aided the National Trust and the Mourne Heritage Trust to carry out such works. My predecessor made a sum of £500,000 available to address access issues within the Mourne AONB and some of this money has been allocated towards the employment of an additional Ranger whose presence may discourage the illegal use of bikes in that area.

I recommend that any reports of inappropriate use of the Mourne by those using quad bikes and trail bikes are referred to the Mourne Heritage Trust who will draw them to the attention of the Safer Mourne Partnership which includes representatives from the PSNI.

Departmental Spend on Consultants

Mr Craig asked the Minister of the Environment how much his Department has spent on internal and external consultants, in each of the last three years. (AQW 7837/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The table below gives details of my Department's expenditure on internal and external consultancy over the last three years.

| | 2006-07 £ | 2007-08 £ | 2008-09 £ |
|----------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Internal Consultancy | 355,486 | 542,125 | 505,671 |
| External Consultancy | 2,135,003 | 1,993,716 | 1,821,675 |
| Total | 2,490,489 | 2,535,841 | 2,327,346 |

Planning Permission

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the fees applicable for outline planning permission for a single house in the countryside (i) prior to December 2005; and (ii) post December 2005. (AQW 7846/09)

The Minister of the Environment: As Planning fees were last increased in May 2005, the same fee was applicable for outline planning permission for building a single house in the countryside prior to and post December 2005. This fee is based on a charge of £200 per 0.1 hectare up to a maximum charge of £8,000 for a site area of 4 hectares or more.

Prior to 18 May 2005 the fee for outline planning permission for erection of a single dwelling in the countryside was a flat fee of £200.

Non-Farming Rural Dwellers

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on PPS21 in relation to non-farming rural dwellers. (AQW 7848/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I look forward to receiving the report from the Independent Working Group that is looking at options for non-farming rural dwellers by 26 June 2009.

Departmental Consultations

Mr Craig asked the Minister of the Environment how much his Department spent on (i) Public Notices for consultations in local or regional newspapers; and (ii) other forms of media for consultations, in each of the past three years. (AQW 7855/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The table below gives details of my Department's expenditure on Public Notices for consultations in local or regional newspapers and other forms of media consultations over the last three years.

| | 2006-07 £ | 2007-08 £ | 2008-09 £ |
|--|----------------|---------------|---------------|
| Public Notices for consultations in local or regional newspapers | 115,308 | 70,414 | 66,007 |
| Other forms of media for consultations | - | - | - |
| Total | 115,308 | 70,414 | 66,007 |

Omagh Divisional Office

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment how the numbers of planning applications submitted to the Omagh Divisional Office in the financial year 2008/09, compare with those submitted in the financial year 2007/08. (AQW 7862/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of planning applications received by the Omagh Divisional Planning Office in the financial year 2008/09 compared to the number received in the financial year 2007/08 is set out in the table below.

In accordance with the Statistics and Registration Service Act (2007) and the associated Code of Practice a figure for Quarter 4 of 2008/09 is not currently available but is scheduled for publication on the planning service website (<http://www.planningni.gov.uk/index/tools/about-statistics.htm>) on 18 June 2009.

However figures for 2007/08 and up to Dec 2008 are provided.

OMAGH DIVISIONAL OFFICE - APPLICATIONS RECEIVED

| Quarter | 2008/09 | 2007/08 |
|--------------|-------------|-------------|
| Q1 | 1527 | 1659 |
| Q2 | 1136 | 1900 |
| Q3 | 917 | 1503 |
| Q4 | - | 1370 |
| Total | 3580 | 6432 |

Correspondence Received from Assembly Members

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of the Environment the target turn-around time for all letters and e-mails received from Assembly Members. (AQW 7887/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The target turn-around time for correspondence received from Assembly Members, as set out in the DOE Corporate and Business Plan 2008-2011, is 10 working days.

Cleaning Products

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of the Environment what plans his Department has to purchase cleaning, household or toiletry products which, including their contents, have not been tested on animals. (AQW 7980/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department of the Environment is required to purchase cleaning, household and toiletry products through contracts let by the Central Procurement Directorate of the Department of Finance and Personnel. While the conditions of contract relating to the supply of these products do not refer specifically to animal testing, all products supplied must comply with any regulations relating to the manufacture of such products, be fit for purpose and be environmentally friendly.

Radon Certificates

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment if he intends to introduce Radon Certificates in all public buildings, given the associated health risks. (AQW 8006/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department of the Environment has no plans to introduce Radon Certificates in public buildings. The measurement of radon in public buildings is the responsibility of the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Anti-TNF Drugs

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, following his statement on 22 January 2008, entitled 'Extra funding for health will save lives', to detail when the anti-TNF medication, to treat rheumatoid arthritis, will become available to all patients requiring this drug treatment. (AQW 7598/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I have allocated additional funding of £39.1 million for specialist drugs over the CSR period 2008-11. Of that sum, commissioners have allocated in excess of £11 million to meet the PSA target that the maximum waiting-time for anti-TNF treatment for severe arthritis will be reduced to 21 weeks by March 2011. As an interim target the Health and Social Care sector is working to reduce waiting times to 9 months by the end of March 2010.

Anti-TNF Drugs

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment he has made of whether early treatment with anti-TNF drugs would be more effective in avoiding crippling joint damage resulting from delaying the availability of the drugs because of cost to joint surgery. (AQW 7601/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Anti-TNF drugs are prescribed for patients in Northern Ireland according to the guidance set down by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE). It is a matter for national regulatory bodies such as NICE to assess the effectiveness of new uses for existing drugs and to advise accordingly.

Private Antenatal Care

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will commission research to ascertain why women who elect for private antenatal care are more likely to have their babies delivered by caesarian section. (AQW 7650/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The safety and quality of our maternity services are a top priority. Over the past year a number of recommendations have been made to Trusts, which when implemented will improve the safety and quality of maternity services in Northern Ireland.

The caesarean rate in Northern Ireland is broadly comparable to the rest of the UK, however the rising rate is an issue which has been of concern across the UK for some time. The Department is working on the introduction of a monitoring system which will collate data on performance in various areas of maternity practice and will flag up any deviations in numbers for investigation and action.

Given the work currently being carried out I do not consider further research into caesarean rates would be appropriate at this time.

Maternity Liaison Committee

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when guidance in relation to the Maternity Liaison Committee will be published. (AQW 7652/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Maternity Services Liaison Guidance was published and issued to the Health and Social Care Board, Public Health Agency and HSC Trusts on 7th May 2009. It is also available on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety website.

Fracture Patients

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the sites which ensure that the further assessment and management of fracture patients is co-ordinated by a fracture liaison nurse or a similar designated person. (AQW 7653/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A fracture liaison nurse is in place at the Belfast Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust. Their role is one of secondary fracture prevention and includes the Accident and Emergency Departments at the Belfast City and Royal Victoria Hospitals. In addition, they provide a co-ordinated service to fracture patients at Lagan Valley Hospital and Drumlough House Care Home within the South Eastern HSC Trust. An Osteoporosis Nurse Specialist provides a similar service for the North Down Ards localities.

A fracture liaison nurse within the Southern Trust provides a service at Craigavon and Daisy Hill hospitals.

I am advised that the Western HSC Trust plans to appoint a fracture liaison nurse during 2009/2010.

Also, a report on 'The Prevention and Management of Fragility Fractures in Northern Ireland' is expected to be finalised in the coming weeks. The Report will make a number of recommendations, one of which is for the establishment of a fracture liaison in all Trusts, for further improving falls prevention and fracture services in Northern Ireland.

Home Births

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for each Health and Social Care Trust, how many pregnant women were told they cannot have home births, and for what reasons, in (i) 2008/09; and (ii) 2007/08. (AQW 7656/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department and the five Health and Social Care Trusts are broadly supportive of patient choice and full information and an explanation of risk factors will always be given so that this choice is fully informed. It is not policy to tell women that they may not have home births, but in some cases women are advised against this choice if it is considered that it may put them and/or their baby at risk. Safety will always be the top priority and advice on this matter will be based solely on a clinical judgement.

In 2007/08 and 2008/09 the numbers of women advised against home births were as follows:

| | 2007/08 | 2008/09 |
|---------------------|---------|---------|
| Belfast Trust | 0 | 0 |
| Northern Trust | 0 | 3 |
| South Eastern Trust | 0 | 0 |
| Southern Trust | 0 | 0 |
| Western Trust | 7 | 6 |

Family Support Workers

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety pursuant to answer AQW 7077/09 to provide dates and minutes of all meetings and consultations held with staff in question. (AQW 7658/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Trust has advised that the process involving Family Support Workers is a small element of the entire review of social work services across the Southern Trust following RPA, including service developments and organisational structures. The process of consultation commenced on the 25th of February, when a meeting was convened as an information briefing including the staff concerned and their Union representative. The Trust has advised that there is no formal minute of this meeting as it was a briefing session. It was agreed that a further meeting would be convened on the 20th April when information in relation to HR issues would be clarified. At the request of the staff concerned, this meeting was postponed until the 20th May.

The meeting took place on 20th May with the staff concerned and a union representative. The Trust has advised that there is no minute of this meeting, but that the meeting involved discussion of issues raised in a Trust position paper. These issues included the rationale for the re-deployment, the proposed re-deployment arrangements and management and supervision arrangements. The meeting also discussed the reimbursement of additional mileage in line with Agenda for Change Terms and Conditions and the Trust's preference for voluntary selection based on individual workers' personal circumstances and expressed preference. If this process is unsuccessful and a resolution is not found, it is intended that a formal selection process restricted to staff affected will be undertaken. Staff agreed to consider the proposals and come back to the Trust with their comments and position by the 19th June.

The Head of Family Support for the Southern Trust is happy to meet with you to discuss this matter if you would find that helpful.

Credit Cards

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many credit cards have been issued to Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety staff for work purposes; and (ii) in relation to punitive bank charges on these cards, (a) how many has there been; (b) the total cost of the charges; and (c) the reasons for the charges, in each of the last five years. (AQW 7668/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) DHSSPS uses 2 credit card accounts under the Government Procurement Card scheme. A third account, used by Health Estates Agency, was recently closed following organisational restructuring.
- (ii) Response to questions (a) and (b) are set out in the table below

| | (a) Number of charges | (b) Total cost of charges |
|---------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| 2004/05 | 0 | 0 |
| 2005/06 | 0 | 0 |
| 2006/07 | 0 | 0 |
| 2007/08 | 2 | £5.08 |
| 2008/09 | 5 | £856.33 |

- (ii) (c) Interest charges are incurred when balances are not cleared in full within 14 days from the date of issue of monthly statements by the card provider. These charges were mainly due to technical issues which led to delays in processing payments within a new accounting system introduced in November 2008. These issues have now been fully resolved.

DHSSPS follows government payment policy of avoiding incurring interest charges on credit cards by endeavouring to pay balances in full by the due date. Processes are in place to ensure this is adhered to where possible.

Children Missing from Care

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to advise if he will review the recording and analysis of incidents of children missing from care, including looked after children, so that the extent of the problem can be assessed and the effect of changes to policy and services can be monitored.[R]

(AQW 7682/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department has recently funded a two year project specifically looking at the issue of young people who habitually go missing from care and the establishment of the Health and Social Care Board offers an opportunity to achieve greater consistency in the recording and analysis of this information. I have asked my officials to liaise with the Board to take this forward.

Sexual Health Promotion Strategy and Action Plan

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the Sexual Health Promotion Strategy and Action Plan.

(AQW 7684/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Since publication of the Sexual Health Strategy and Action Plan in December 2008, my Department has identified a Chair and drawn up terms of reference for the Sexual Health Promotion Network, which will oversee implementation of the Action Plan. A preliminary meeting will take place with the Chair in the near future to discuss appropriate membership of the Network taking account of the reorganisation of the infrastructure of Health and Social Care Organisation. In the meantime, funding has been made available to the Public Health Agency towards implementation of the Action Plan.

Car Parking Fees

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration has been given to abolishing car parking fees for patients attending hospital to undergo tests for cancer.

(AQW 7689/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The underlying principle of exemption from hospital car parking charges is that patients who incur significant costs because of the frequency or duration of their visits to hospital should be exempt from car parking charges. Diagnostic tests for cancer should normally result in a limited number of visits and would not be subject to exemption. However, if cancer is diagnosed and patients require radiotherapy or chemotherapy, they will be entitled to exemption from car parking charges for their treatment.

Oasis Dental Care Contract

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when dentists appointed through the Oasis Dental Care contract will begin treating patients in Derry City.

(AQW 7725/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The agreement with Oasis Dental care specifies that there will be a phased roll out of dental practices across Northern Ireland, starting with the areas of greatest need. I expect that the 4 additional dentists allocated to Londonderry will begin seeing patients towards the end of this year, subject to any required planning permission being approved promptly.

This interim period will allow Oasis the time necessary to acquire and equip new premises to the high standards expected of any Health Service dental practice. Once opened, 6000 people currently unable to access Health Service dentistry will be able to see a Health Service Dentist for quality, affordable dental treatment.

Mobile Phone Networks

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether his Department will make representation to mobile phone network providers to address the excessive charges incurred by mobile phone users in border areas, given its impact on people using suicide awareness hotlines due to the additional drain on phone credits and the subsequent difficulty faced by agencies in returning calls to users whose credit has expired.

(AQW 7767/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Reducing the rate of suicide remains a priority for my Department. I established the “Lifeline” 24/7 crisis response helpline in January 2008 to provide additional support for people at times of crisis in their lives. The “Lifeline” service handled over 55,000 calls in its first year in operation.

Lifeline is free to call within Northern Ireland from both landlines and mobile phones. However, I appreciate that people who live in border areas are often affected by the “roaming” nature of mobile phone networks. Depending on their location they can be switched to a provider based in the Republic of Ireland and thereby incur charges should they phone the “Lifeline” number.

I do not have responsibility for telecom matters; however, I am supportive of all efforts to remove the additional charges incurred by people in such circumstances. Whilst I understand that this is a European-wide border problem, I intend to write to Ofcom to highlight the particular problems faced by individuals in border areas in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Wheelchair Service

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the implementation of the recommendations contained in his report of August 2008, “Proposals for the Reform of the Northern Ireland Wheelchair Service”, including performance targets and related outcomes and measurements. (AQW 7761/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A Regional Wheelchair Implementation Group has been established, which includes service users, to take forward the Report’s recommendations. As part of the process of implementing the recommendations, my Department has adopted a Whole Systems Thinking approach using LEAN methodology to increase efficiency and streamline wheelchair services in Northern Ireland. A successful pilot in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust produced an 86% reduction in waiting times for basic wheelchairs from an average of 125 days to an average of 15 days, and was welcomed by service users and staff. This approach has been rolled out across all Health and Social Care Trusts. A series of rapid improvement events have also been held in Trusts to involve key staff and identify and secure sustainable improvements to the wheelchair service from point of need to delivery. Furthermore, I have also set the following targets for the improvement of wheelchair provision in Northern Ireland:

- By March 2009, provide 35 additional specialised seats/wheelchairs compared to the position at March 2008 (The 2008/09 target, which was to provide an additional 35 specialist wheelchairs, has been successfully met);
- By 31 March 2010, ensure a maximum waiting time of 18 weeks for 90% of all wheelchairs;
- By 2011, ensure a 13 week maximum waiting time for specialised wheelchairs.

Actichlor Solution

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to Actichlor solution being introduced as a disinfectant throughout Health and Social Care Trusts (i) to detail when a health impact assessment was implemented and to provide the results; (ii) to provide COSHH assessments; (iii) how many incidents involving accidental eye splashes and other incidents with Actichlor have occurred; and (iv) to detail the risks of occupational hazards from continued exposure to Actichlor. (AQW 7894/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 require employers, in this case the Health & Social Care Trusts, to control exposure to hazardous substances to prevent ill health. Information on (i) health impact assessments; (ii) COSHH assessments; and (iii) incidents involving Actichlor; is not held centrally. Potential problems with Actichlor include irritation of eyes and the respiratory system but there should be no occupational hazards providing these products are used in accordance with manufacturers’ instructions.

DEPARTMENT FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Bridges

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) what plans there are to construct bridges across the Blackwater River at Annaghroe and Knockaginny; (ii) what are the most recent cost estimates for the bridges and associated expenditure to be carried out by his Department; and (iii) if the 'credit crunch' has led to reconsideration of these projects. (AQW 4090/09)

Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): With regard to AQW 4090/09, my Department's Roads Service has advised that plans to construct bridges across the Blackwater River at Annaghroe and Knockaginny are at an advanced stage. Work is scheduled to start by the autumn of this year and due to be completed by spring 2010. Funding for the construction of these bridges is being provided by the Irish Government and this funding does not appear to have been compromised by the recent economic downturn.

Blackwater River Crossings

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to the answer to AQW 5055/08, to detail the traffic volume monitoring information for the Blackwater River crossings from Ballagh to Cortynan. (AQW 4091/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Regarding AQW 4091/09, I would refer the Member to my response to AQW 5055/08, in which I advised that my Department's Roads Service estimated that approximately 200 vehicles per day use the Ballagh crossing and that approximately 800 vehicles per day use the Cortynan crossing.

Bridges

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development what arrangements the Planning Service has in place to consult riparian owners and other local residents about proposals to construct bridges over the Blackwater River at Annaghroe and Knockaginny; and what are the outcomes of this consultation. (AQW 4092/09)

Minister for Regional Development: In relation to AQW 4092/09, Planning Service consultation arrangements for these proposals are the normal procedures associated with planning applications, i.e. advertisements in the local press and the issuing of neighbour notification notices to applicable properties.

The two applications, M/2008/1111/F for the Knockaginny Bridge and M/2008/1112/F for the Annaghroe Bridge, were advertised in the local press during the week ending 25 October 2008. As there are no occupied dwellings within 90 metres of either application site, no neighbour notification letters were issued.

In respect of M/2008/111/F, one letter of objection was received and in respect of M/2008/1112/F, five letters of objection were received.

Roads Service

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his Department's spending on roads maintenance, by Roads Service division, for 2005-06; 2006-07; and 2007-08. (AQW 4186/09)

Minister for Regional Development: All figures are in £ million's.

| Division | Operation & Maintenance | Operation & Maintenance | Operation & Maintenance |
|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| | Year 2005-2006 | Year 2006-2007 | Year 2007-2008 |
| Northern Division | 29,475 | 26,737 | 28,950 |
| Eastern Division | 32,844 | 31,047 | 36,011 |
| Southern Division | 30,719 | 28,349 | 32,501 |

| Division | Operation & Maintenance | Operation & Maintenance | Operation & Maintenance |
|------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| | Year 2005-2006 | Year 2006-2007 | Year 2007-2008 |
| Western Division | 28,146 | 28,016 | 30,717 |
| Total | 121,184 | 114,149 | 128,179 |

Translink

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3742/09 to provide this monthly breakdown for (i) 2004; (ii) 2005; (iii) 2006; and (iv) 2007. (AQW 4391/09)

Minister for Regional Development:

P&L FUEL COSTS 2004

| | Ulsterbus | Metro | NIR | Total |
|-----|-------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Jan | 880,661 | 251,491 | 112,306 | 1,244,458 |
| Feb | 991,364 | 269,306 | 129,229 | 1,389,899 |
| Mar | 1,254,375 | 334,229 | 161,719 | 1,750,323 |
| Apr | 877,493 | 243,595 | 109,924 | 1,231,012 |
| May | 974,007 | 254,812 | 105,277 | 1,334,096 |
| Jun | 1,234,149 | 322,739 | 139,325 | 1,696,213 |
| Jul | 761,246 | 222,013 | 111,529 | 1,094,788 |
| Aug | 769,352 | 222,485 | 119,103 | 1,110,940 |
| Sep | 1,203,035 | 317,085 | 115,697 | 1,635,817 |
| Oct | 1,051,446 | 274,939 | 155,394 | 1,481,779 |
| Nov | 1,009,942 | 268,785 | 126,198 | 1,404,925 |
| Dec | 1,218,221 | 329,136 | 156,204 | 1,703,561 |
| | 12,225,291 | 3,310,615 | 1,541,905 | 17,077,811 |

P&L FUEL COSTS 2005

| | Ulsterbus | Metro | NIR | Total |
|-----|-----------|---------|---------|-----------|
| Jan | 878,840 | 244,507 | 121,545 | 1,244,892 |
| Feb | 996,133 | 282,875 | 167,253 | 1,446,261 |
| Mar | 1,220,664 | 371,177 | 135,011 | 1,726,852 |
| Apr | 893,455 | 274,681 | 113,356 | 1,281,492 |
| May | 932,529 | 271,309 | 40,416 | 1,244,253 |
| Jun | 1,195,368 | 369,683 | 41,086 | 1,606,138 |
| Jul | 747,348 | 230,284 | 414,789 | 1,392,421 |
| Aug | 827,551 | 245,061 | 214,896 | 1,287,509 |
| Sep | 1,051,794 | 335,631 | 184,744 | 1,572,169 |
| Oct | 1,038,634 | 309,618 | 175,518 | 1,523,769 |
| Nov | 1,045,855 | 323,408 | 263,512 | 1,632,775 |
| Dec | 1,243,209 | 395,083 | 219,066 | 1,857,358 |

| | Ulsterbus | Metro | NIR | Total |
|--|-------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| | 12,071,382 | 3,653,315 | 2,091,192 | 17,815,889 |

P&L FUEL COSTS 2006

| | Ulsterbus | Metro | Nir | Total |
|-----|-------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Jan | 804,651 | 279,004 | 152,982 | 1,236,637 |
| Feb | 984,238 | 322,696 | 170,542 | 1,477,475 |
| Mar | 1,427,921 | 533,320 | 443,610 | 2,404,851 |
| Apr | 984,070 | 310,196 | 212,555 | 1,506,821 |
| May | 1,190,287 | 373,550 | 278,035 | 1,841,873 |
| Jun | 1,479,995 | 483,815 | 267,576 | 2,231,387 |
| Jul | 1,382,895 | 347,561 | 299,934 | 2,030,390 |
| Aug | 981,211 | 351,339 | 322,058 | 1,654,608 |
| Sep | 1,475,016 | 503,978 | 425,401 | 2,404,395 |
| Oct | 1,033,947 | 276,972 | 466,529 | 1,777,447 |
| Nov | 1,288,508 | 414,478 | 303,458 | 2,006,444 |
| Dec | 1,694,182 | 496,385 | 376,622 | 2,567,189 |
| | 14,726,921 | 4,693,295 | 3,719,301 | 23,139,517 |

P&L FUEL COSTS 2007

| | Ulsterbus | Metro | NIR | Total |
|-----|-------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Jan | 958,095 | 316,223 | 232,903 | 1,507,221 |
| Feb | 1,502,593 | 456,362 | 421,224 | 2,380,179 |
| Mar | 1,778,475 | 503,553 | 426,530 | 2,708,557 |
| Apr | 1,180,934 | 374,047 | 313,881 | 1,868,862 |
| May | 1,320,188 | 390,695 | 340,432 | 2,051,315 |
| Jun | 1,626,049 | 502,244 | 406,470 | 2,534,764 |
| Jul | 942,145 | 366,703 | 352,981 | 1,661,829 |
| Aug | 960,725 | 366,895 | 299,489 | 1,627,109 |
| Sep | 1,878,177 | 522,639 | 402,808 | 2,803,624 |
| Oct | 1,328,877 | 414,308 | 360,947 | 2,104,133 |
| Nov | 1,364,100 | 424,570 | 367,588 | 2,156,258 |
| Dec | 1,910,569 | 560,408 | 475,849 | 2,946,826 |
| | 16,750,927 | 5,198,647 | 4,401,102 | 26,350,676 |

P&L FUEL COSTS 2008

| | Ulsterbus | Metro | NIR | Total |
|-----|------------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| Jan | 1,116,935 | 363,579 | 322,564 | 1,803,078 |
| Feb | 1,512,201 | 444,906 | 358,507 | 2,315,615 |
| Mar | 2,041,830 | 598,762 | 589,081 | 3,229,674 |
| Apr | 1,701,277 | 507,592 | 439,223 | 2,648,092 |

| | Ulsterbus | Metro | NIR | Total |
|-----|-------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| May | 1,624,874 | 483,947 | 439,813 | 2,548,634 |
| Jun | 2,143,896 | 682,104 | 558,572 | 3,384,572 |
| Jul | 1,237,996 | 428,161 | 406,894 | 2,073,051 |
| Aug | 1,391,795 | 511,441 | 482,638 | 2,385,874 |
| Sep | 1,884,938 | 588,379 | 491,789 | 2,965,105 |
| Oct | 1,891,400 | 584,058 | 527,441 | 3,002,900 |
| Nov | 1,790,200 | 618,611 | 571,832 | 2,980,642 |
| Dec | 1,987,786 | 639,670 | 579,951 | 3,207,407 |
| | 20,325,128 | 6,451,211 | 5,768,305 | 32,544,644 |

Roads Service

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the basis on which his Department determines the budget for each division of Roads Service. (AQW 4450/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I can advise the Member that my Department's Road Service budget is allocated to its Divisions on a basis of need.

In relation to the budget for major works, improvements are prioritised across the whole of the North, after considering a wide range of criteria, including 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, 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 a needs-based priority approach. 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 approach used, ensures so far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds across the North.

In relation to roads maintenance, the resources available are also allocated to the four Roads Service Divisions on the basis of need, 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 across council areas, to ensure, as far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds across the whole of the North.

Newcastle Wastewater Treatment and Pumping Plants

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the energy costs for Newcastle Wastewater Treatment and Pumping Plants, in each of the last five years; and how do these costs compare with other waste water treatment plants of similar scale and capacity. (AQW 4564/09)

Minister for Regional Development: The table below shows the energy costs from 2004/05 for Newcastle Wastewater Treatment Works and two comparable works in terms of the amount of wastewater treated.

| Works | Energy Costs | | | | |
|-----------|--------------|---------|---------|----------|-----------------|
| | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 | 2008/09* YTD |
| Newcastle | £85,434 | £79,907 | £88,338 | £137,130 | £136,205 |

| Works | Energy Costs | | | | |
|------------|------------------------------|---------|------------|----------|-----------------|
| | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 | 2008/09* YTD |
| Banbridge | £82,987 | £86,775 | £107,450 | £115,560 | £111,632 |
| Ballyclare | New works under construction | | £107,396** | £137,697 | £144,816 |

* Year to date costs

** Part year costs for new works (9 months in 2006/07)

I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that differences in energy costs between similar sized wastewater treatment works can be due to a number of factors including different treatment processes or varying discharge standards set by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

The energy costs for pumping stations associated with these works are not readily available and could only be provided following a substantial manual exercise.

Translink

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development when he expects Translink to grant approval for the Crumlin railway bridge illumination project; and to outline the cost of this project. (AQW 4730/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department is not providing funding for this project. Translink are liaising with Antrim Borough Council, who are promoting and funding the scheme, to ensure that all requisite approvals are obtained and that there are no implications for railway safety and operations in the vicinity of the bridge.

Translink

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the dates and outcomes of all major fare price reviews conducted by Translink for (i) bus services; and (ii) rail services, in each of the last five years; and to state the overall percentage change in fare prices following each review. (AQW 4855/09)

Minister for Regional Development: The following table provides detail on the dates and percentage changes of Translink's average fares for bus and rail for the last 5 years.

| Date of fares increase | Ulsterbus | Metro | NIR |
|------------------------|-----------|-------|------|
| 29/3/04 | 5.0% | 5.0% | 5.0% |
| 28/3/05 | 2.0% | 2.0% | 5.0% |
| 27/3/06 | 9.0% | 7.0% | 9.0% |
| 26/3/07 | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| 31/3/08 | 4.0% | 3.1% | 4.9% |
| 25/8/08 | 5.0% | 6.4% | 4.3% |

Fuel

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4389/09, what quantity of fuels, or barrels or litres, was purchased as a result of each of these individual agreements. (AQW 4932/09)

Minister for Regional Development: The quantity of fuel purchased as a result of these agreements is provided below:

| | Million litres | |
|--|----------------|---------|
| | ULSD | Gas Oil |
| 12 Months April 2004 to March 2005 | 21.5 | 7.5 |
| 12 Months April 2005 to March 2006 | 21.5 | 7.5 |
| 6 Months April 2006 to September 2006 | 8.65 | 4.3 |
| 6 Months October 2006 to March 2007 | 11.0 | 5.4 |
| 6 Months April 2007 to September 2007 | 10.5 | 5.4 |
| 6 Months October 2007 to March 2008 | 11.3 | 5.4 |
| 6 Months April 2008 to September 2008 | 11.9 | 5.7 |
| 3 Months October 2008 to December 2008 | 6.6 | 2.9 |
| 6 Months January 2009 to June 2009 | 13.2 | 5.7 |
| 3 Months July 2009 to September 2009 | 6.6 | 2.9 |
| 3 Months October 2009 to December 2009 | 6.6 | 2.9 |
| 6 Months January 2010 to June 2010 | 13.2 | 5.7 |

Note that the figures above include one period, in April 2006, when fuel was purchased direct from the supplier at the market price before a forward contract was put in place in May 2006.

Translink

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the mileage of Translink operated bus routes that carry children to and from school that are (i) gritted; and (ii) not gritted, by the Roads Service.

(AQW 5013/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink has advised that they don't operate a dedicated school bus fleet and therefore don't record the specific information requested, in relation to the mileage of bus services operated to carry children to and from school.

With regard to my Department's Roads Service's policy on salting school bus routes, I would refer the Member to my recent reply to his Assembly Question AQW5014/09.

Closure of the M2

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what actions were taken to advertise the recent closure of the M2 for resurfacing.

(AQW 5263/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that prior to the closure of the M2 for resurfacing, on Sunday 15 February 2009, normal notice arrangements for major road closures were put in place using various media. These included the following:

- On Wednesday 11 February 2009, a press release issued by Roads Service. In addition to this, advance notification was also provided to all the emergency services and utility providers.
- On Thursday 12 February, Radio Ulster interviewed a Roads Service official, on the Good Evening Ulster programme.
- On Friday 13 February various radio stations, particularly Radio Ulster, issued bulletins. Advance information was also provided, through this media, on the morning of Saturday 14 February.
- On Friday 13 February Roads Service posted details of the closure on its 'Trafficwatchni' website. This included details of the section of motorway to be closed, the period of closure and advised that a diversionary route was in operation. Similar information was also provided through a taped telephone message, for members of the public telephoning Roads Service's traffic information hotline number.
- On Friday 13 February 'Traffic Alerts' were e-mailed to all registered users. These notified users of all proposed major road closures and also provided information on diversionary routes.

- Appropriate information was displayed on static and variable message signs, on the M2, in advance of the closure.

Closure of the M2

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what procedures are in place to compensate people who missed flights or ferries as a result of delays caused by roadworks on the M2 on 15 February 2009. (AQW 5264/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Whilst I regret that there was inconvenience caused to road users during the closure of the M2 on Sunday 15 February, I must advise you that no statutory provision exists for the payment of compensation to road users who are delayed by roadworks on the road network.

As I advised the Member in my reply to his Assembly Question AQW 5263/09, this was a planned closure to allow the final surfacing to be laid on the city bound carriageway of the M2. The closure was well advertised through the normal range of channels, which included:

- a press release to the media,
- Roads Service's website (Trafficwatchni),
- Roads Service's active e-mail alert service, and
- Roads Service's Road Works Report.

The press release and subsequent interview with Roads Service officials on Radio Ulster warned of possible delays on the M2. Radio stations, including Radio Ulster, also issued traffic bulletins on Friday 13 February, advising of the planned closure of the M2 on Sunday 15 February. Further bulletins were issued on the morning of Saturday 14 February. Signs warning of the planned closure were erected at Sandyknowes junction and on the M2 one week prior the closure.

I am satisfied that Roads Service did take all reasonable steps to inform the public about the planned closure of the M2 on Sunday 15 February.

Road Works

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail all press releases from his Department advising of the road works and lane restrictions on the M2 on Sunday 15 February. (AQW 5268/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that prior to the closure of the M2 for resurfacing, on Sunday 15 February 2009, normal notice arrangements for major road closures were put in place using various media. These included the following:

- On Wednesday 11 February 2009, a press release issued by Roads Service. In addition to this, advance notification was also provided to all the emergency services and utility providers.
- On Thursday 12 February, Radio Ulster interviewed a Roads Service official, on the Good Evening Ulster programme.
- On Friday 13 February various radio stations, particularly Radio Ulster, issued bulletins. Advance information was also provided, through this media, on the morning of Saturday 14 February.
- On Friday 13 February Roads Service posted details of the closure on its 'Trafficwatchni' website. This included details of the section of motorway to be closed, the period of closure and advised that a diversionary route was in operation. Similar information was also provided through a taped telephone message, for members of the public telephoning Roads Service's traffic information hotline number.
- On Friday 13 February 'Traffic Alerts' were e-mailed to all registered users. These notified users of all proposed major road closures and also provided information on diversionary routes.
- Appropriate information was displayed on static and variable message signs, on the M2, in advance of the closure.

Traffic Jam on M2

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps have been taken to ensure there is no repeat of the traffic jams experienced on the M2 on Sunday 15 February 2009. (AQW 5276/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that major roadworks on the M2 are normally limited to off peak periods, that is, overnight 10pm to 6am on weekdays and on Saturday night 10pm to 11:00am on Sunday. Now that the work associated with the exceptional closure on Sunday 15 February 2009 has been completed, I can advise, there are no current plans to close the M2 outside of these off-peak periods.

As a consequence of the traffic jams on Sunday 15 February, Roads Service will review its notification procedures for all future motorway works. In addition, Roads Service will be writing to the motorway maintenance contractor reminding them of the importance of providing appropriate advance notification for all closures.

Although these measures will reduce the possibility for further significant traffic jams due to roadworks, other unforeseen incidents, such as traffic accidents, which are out of the control of Roads Service, have the potential to cause considerable disruption to the flow of traffic. In such circumstances, Roads Service will implement suitable remedial action, in an attempt to keep any traffic delays to a minimum.

Traffic Jam on M2

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps the Department is taking to ensure that the traffic jam that occurred on the M2 Sunday February 15, 2009, will not be repeated. (AQW 5302/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that major roadworks on the M2 are normally limited to off peak periods, that is, overnight 10pm to 6am on weekdays and on Saturday night 10pm to 11:00am on Sunday. Now that the work associated with the exceptional closure on Sunday 15 February 2009 has been completed, I can advise, there are no current plans to close the M2 outside of these off-peak periods.

As a consequence of the traffic jams on Sunday 15 February, Roads Service will review its notification procedures for all future motorway works. In addition, Roads Service will be writing to the motorway maintenance contractor reminding them of the importance of providing appropriate advance notification for all closures.

Although these measures will reduce the possibility for further significant traffic jams due to roadworks, other unforeseen incidents, such as traffic accidents, which are out of the control of Roads Service, have the potential to cause considerable disruption to the flow of traffic. In such circumstances, Roads Service will implement suitable remedial action, in an attempt to keep any traffic delays to a minimum.

Economic Downturn

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development (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 5463/09)

Minister for Regional Development:

- (i) On Public Transport, there is some evidence that the downturn may reduce passenger numbers. The downturn in the local property market may also delay or reduce anticipated proceeds from asset sales. For Roads Service, there is no discernible impact of the downturn on delivery at this stage.
- (ii) Roads Service has met and will continue to meet with construction industry representatives to ensure that the earliest possible notice is given for those schemes ready to start in 2009/10.

On Water, future funding arrangements are for the Executive to agree collectively. Appreciating the difficulties faced by households with increasing bills, the Executive decided in November 2008 that there will be no additional household water and sewerage payments in 2009/10. In February 2009 the Executive agreed to

extend phasing in of continued non-domestic contributions to ease the impact on businesses and other non-domestic customers in 2009/10.

My Department is also delivering its part of the Executive's December response to the economic downturn which allocated £4.3 million for Public Transport Capital Works and further resurfacing work by local contractors.

Money Spent on Trains in North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how much money has been spent in the North Down area on (i) trains; (ii) train tracks; and (iii) train stations, over the last three years, and how this compares with other areas. (AQW 7584/09)

Minister for Regional Development: In the last three years capital investment of (i) £16.5m was paid towards the procurement of 20 new trains; a number of these trains will be deployed in the North Down area to facilitate increases in frequency and capacity; (ii) £299,962 has been spent on signalling along the train tracks and (iii) £5,263 on train stations within the North Down area. Stations and halts in the North Down area were included within works on train stations and halts, totalling in the region of £15m, which were undertaken to comply with Disability Discrimination legislation and Translink's New Rail Service Programme.

Given the complexity of the rail network it is difficult to give meaningful comparisons with other areas. Expenditure on the rail network is prioritised on the basis of need.

Southern Distributor Road, Newtownards

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development what the anticipated opening date is for the southern distributor road in Newtownards. (AQW 7608/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the A20 Southern Distributor Road is programmed to be substantially completed by 30 July 2009.

M2 Hill Section Country Bound

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) for his assessment of the surface of the M2 hill section country bound; and (ii) if all resurfacing work on this section of the motorway is complete. (AQW 7666/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the condition of the M2 road surface is routinely inspected and monitored by Roads Service and by Highway Management, the Contractor, using a number of techniques, which include daily patrols, weekly inspections, visual surveys and various machine condition surveys. An inspection of the surface condition of the country-bound carriageway of the M2 was undertaken in January this year and showed some deficiencies in the road surface. As an outcome of this survey, resurfacing of lane 3 and various areas of lane 1 and lane 2 was subsequently undertaken on this section of the M2 during January and February.

There is presently no further resurfacing work planned for this section of the M2, however, a further road condition survey is planned for the M2 in July and August this year. If the outcome of this survey indicates that the surface is unsatisfactory, the contract requires Highway Management to carry out the necessary maintenance works.

Roads Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of locations where the Roads Service has replaced lighting at the back of houses, in the last three years. (AQW 7679/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised that they do not maintain records that facilitate the identification of street lighting, located at the back of houses. They

have, however, noted that Roads Service does not generally provide street lighting on footpaths or back entries, which only give rear access to properties, or are alternative routes to already lighted roads or footpaths.

Exceptions to this general rule include locations where a footpath or back entry serves as a through link to another street, or services a significant local amenity, such as a community hall or school.

Vandalism at Bus Stops

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of repairs resulting from acts of vandalism at bus stops in (i) Newtownabbey; (ii) Carrickfergus; and (iii) Larne, in each of the past five years. (AQW 7736/09)

Minister for Regional Development: In January 2001, my Department's Roads Service, and the majority of District Councils, entered into a 15-year contract with Adshel (the bus shelter provider) for the provision of approximately 1500 bus shelters throughout the various council areas.

The provision and maintenance of these shelters are funded by Adshel through advertising revenue and at no cost to the Department. The contract covers the vast majority of bus shelters in the North. The Department has no information on the costs incurred by Adshel in carrying out their contractual commitments.

Translink have advised that their information on costs for the repair and maintenance of bus-stops, in Newtownabbey, Carrickfergus and Larne Ulsterbus operational areas, is only available for the past four financial years. While the majority of these costs were incurred as a result of vandalism, the figures in the table below, also include costs for repairs due to general wear and tear.

| | Carrickfergus £ | Larne £ | Newtownabbey £ | Total £ |
|--------------|--------------------|--------------|-------------------|---------------|
| 2005/2006 | 829 | 2,465 | 3,588 | 6,882 |
| 2006/2007 | 1,223 | 501 | 2,606 | 4,330 |
| 2007/2008 | 599 | 2,235 | 3,541 | 6,375 |
| 2008/2009 | 656 | 572 | 4,997 | 6,225 |
| Total | 3,307 | 5,773 | 14,732 | 23,812 |

Road Service and NI Water

Mrs Long asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the processes followed by Road Service and NI Water when they are presented with evidence of repeat out of sewer or other flooding on the site of a planning application, which they have not raised in the statutory consultation process. (AQW 7739/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that they are a consultee to Planning Service, providing specialist information and transportation advice for development applications that affect the public road network. Road Service's assessment of planning applications is, therefore, restricted to road safety, traffic progression and transportation issues.

Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has advised that its response to Planning Service is informative about the availability of water supply, foul and surface water infrastructure and wastewater treatment capacity.

If an application is approved by Planning Service, NIW requires the developer to submit details of proposed drainage layouts for assessment and new developments are not permitted to connect to the public sewerage system unless adequate capacity has been identified.

NIW undertakes regular scheduled maintenance on the sewerage infrastructure to ensure that it operates effectively. It is also currently undertaking a number of drainage area studies to assess the capacity of the sewerage network and to identify parts of the system that need to be upgraded. These studies will lead to a programme of sewer improvements and upgrades which will reduce the risk of repeated out-of-sewer flooding and will cater for future development.

Water Supply in Upper Bann

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development why there were 89 planned interruptions to the water supply in the Upper Bann area, which amounts to 35% of all planned interruptions across 18 parliamentary constituencies, in the last four months. (AQW 7746/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that a programme of major watermain rehabilitation work has been undertaken in the Upper Bann area during the past four months, which has resulted in a higher than average number of planned interruptions to the public water supply.

This work will provide major benefits for customers in the area including enhanced drinking water quality, reduced interruptions to supply and improved water pressure.

Potable Water for Households

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the sources of potable water for households in (i) Lurgan; (ii) Portadown; and (iii) Banbridge. (AQW 7748/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the Lurgan and Portadown areas are supplied from Castor Bay Water Treatment Works while the Banbridge area is supplied from both Castor Bay and Foffany Water Treatment Works.

The raw water sources for Castor Bay and Foffany Water Treatment Works are Lough Neagh, Foffany Impounding Reservoir and Spelga Dam.

Car Parking

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if there is a mediation system in place to enable car parking problems in estates to be settled and, if so, whether his Department and the PSNI are involved. (AQW 7754/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I am not aware of a mediation system in place to enable car parking problems in estates to be settled. However, my Department's Roads Service has a policy, agreed with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, for processing requests for additional parking facilities. The PSNI may, on occasions, be consulted by Roads Service as part of this process.

Vehicles Damaged by Potholes

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of compensation claims which have been received by his Department from owners of vehicles damaged by potholes in the West Tyrone constituency; and (ii) the amount of money that has been paid out, in each of the last five years. (AQW 7759/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Unfortunately, my Department's Central Claims Unit does not hold the information in the format requested. However, Central Claims Unit does maintain a record of compensation claims details for each Roads Service Section Office. The area of the West Tyrone constituency includes all of the Omagh and Strabane Section Offices plus some parts of roads which fall within the Derry Section Office area. The following figures show the number of compensation claims received and the amounts of compensation paid by the Central Claims Unit for each of the last five financial years in respect to damage to motor vehicles caused by potholes in the Omagh and Strabane Section Office areas. Disaggregation of the Derry Section Office figures to isolate the stretches of road within the West Tyrone constituency could only be extracted at disproportionate cost.

2008/2009

| | No. of Claims Received | Compensation Paid |
|--------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| Omagh | 223 | £6,374.54 |
| Strabane | 12 | £507.29 |
| Total | 235 | £6,881.83 |
| 2007/08 | | |
| Omagh | 73 | £4,677.57 |
| Strabane | 13 | £866.74 |
| Total | 86 | £5,544.31 |
| 2006/07 | | |
| Omagh | 78 | £6,055.05 |
| Strabane | 17 | £633.21 |
| Total | 95 | £6,688.26 |

2005/06

| | No. of Claims Received | Compensation Paid |
|--------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| Omagh | 30 | £2,090.41 |
| Strabane | 6 | £205.00 |
| Total | 36 | £2,295.41 |
| 2004/05 | | |
| Omagh | 43 | £1,659.93 |
| Strabane | 2 | £503.16 |
| Total | 45 | £2,163.09 |

Translink

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the level of revenue subsidy paid to Translink for each financial year since 2003-2004, broken into its various headings, including public service obligation and concessionary fares. (AQW 7781/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Details of the revenue paid to Translink for each financial year since 2003-2004, broken into its various headings including public service obligation and concessionary fares are set out below:

| Revenue subsidy to Translink | 2003/04 £000s | 2004/05 £000s | 2005/06 £000s | 2006/07 £000s | 2007/08 £000s | 2008/09 £000s |
|--|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Concessionary Fares Bus | 13,885 | 14,751 | 15,320 | 16,860 | 17,606 | 20,956 |
| Concessionary Fares Implementation & Admin | 259 | 261 | 76 | 332 | 577 | 1,004 |
| Concessionary Fares Rail | 1,922 | 2,091 | 2,393 | 3,306 | 4,104 | 6,067 |
| Fuel Duty Rebate (FDR) | 7,711 | 8,040 | 8,565 | 8,688 | 9,704 | 10,471 |
| Public Service Obligation-Railways (PSO) | 18,724 | 20,924 | 21,859 | 21,682 | 24,054 | 22,984 |
| NILGOSC Bus | 0 | 0 | 2,012 | 3,502 | 4,943 | 3,706 |
| NITHC Pensions | 815 | 755 | 704 | 637 | 594 | 568 |

| Revenue subsidy to Translink | 2003/04 £000s | 2004/05 £000s | 2005/06 £000s | 2006/07 £000s | 2007/08 £000s | 2008/09 £000s |
|---|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Rural Transport Fund (RTF) | 766 | 737 | 831 | 976 | 929 | 1,071 |
| Transport Programme for People with Disabilities (TPPD) | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 182 | 161 |
| Bus Route Subsidy | 1,313 | 1,302 | 1,442 | 2,137 | 2,207 | 0 |
| Total | 45,395 | 49,271 | 53,428 | 58,481 | 62,693 | 66,988 |

It is arguable if concessionary fares reimbursement, which operates on a 'no better no worse' principle, can be described as a subsidy to Translink. It is effectively a subsidy to the passengers eligible. Similarly RTF and TPPD payments are effectively contract payments as opposed to subsidy.

Translink

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the level of revenue budgeted for Translink for (i) 2009/10 and (ii) 2010/11, broken into its various headings, including public service obligation and concessionary fares. (AQW 7782/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Details of revenue budgeted for Translink for (i) 2009/10 and (ii) 2010/11, broken into its various headings, including public service obligation and concessionary fares is set out below:

| Revenue Budgeted for Translink | 2009/10 £000s | 2010/11 £000s |
|---|------------------|------------------|
| Concessionary Fares Bus | 23,198 | 24,742 |
| Concessionary Fares Implementation & Admin | 886 | 886 |
| Concessionary Fares Rail | 5,255 | 5,683 |
| Fuel Duty Rebate (FDR) | 10,220 | 10,710 |
| Public Service Obligation (PSO) | 21,274 | 21,274 |
| NILGOSC Bus | 2,800 | 2,800 |
| NITHC Pensions | 448 | 618 |
| Rural Transport Fund (RTF) | 1275 | 1275 |
| Transport Programme for People with Disabilities (TPPD) | 200 | 200 |
| Total | 65,556 | 68,188 |

Note the table above excludes Bus Route Subsidy which is not payable in 2009/10 and 2010/11. In comparing figures above against previous years it should be recognised that in year bids have not been made in 2009/10 as yet.

Roads Service Car Park in Holywood

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the timescale for the completion of the transfer of the Roads Service car park in Holywood to the Department for Social Development in relation to 'the Front' development. (AQW 7784/09)

Minister for Regional Development: In order to facilitate the development in Holywood known as 'the Front', my Department's Roads Service has agreed, in principle, to transfer the car park in Hibernia Street to the Department for Social Development, who will be dealing with the proposed sale to the developer.

The transfer of this land between the two Departments requires joint Ministerial agreement and the approval of the Executive. A joint submission to the Executive from Minister Ritchie and myself, in respect of the transfer of non-surplus DRD car parks to DSD, to facilitate town centre regeneration, will issue shortly.

M1 Motorway

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department has plans to provide south-facing slip roads to the M1 motorway in the Dunmurry area. (AQW 7794/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has confirmed that the provision of additional slip roads onto the M1 at Blacks Road, Dunmurry is included in both the Belfast metropolitan transport plan, and the Belfast metropolitan area plan (2015). The proposed slip roads will facilitate traffic heading to and from Lisburn, the south and the west.

The investment strategy for Northern Ireland sets the funding priorities for the period 2008-2018 and determines the relative priority and timing of all planned major works. The Blacks Road slips scheme is currently programmed for delivery in the period 2013/14 to 2017/18. The provision of this road scheme will be subject to the successful completion of the statutory procedures, detailed economic appraisal and the availability of funding, at that time.

M5 Motorway

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development the expected lifespan of the carriageway surface of the M5 motorway and when the next major resurfacing is scheduled to begin. (AQW 7814/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the surface of the M5 was constructed in 1980 and was resurfaced in 1997. Highway resurfacing materials are generally expected to have a typical life-span of 12 to 15 years. However, this depends on a number of factors, including the volume of traffic and weather conditions.

It is planned to resurface a total of 0.5 km in each direction of the M5 this year. The work is planned to take place during overnight closures on the 27 and 28 June 2009.

Newcastle Sewerage Treatment Works

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development if he plans to meet with the Environment Minister, to discuss the situation where no multiple developments are obtaining planning approval, due to the condition of Newcastle sewerage treatment works. (AQW 7830/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I have no plans at present to meet with the Environment Minister to discuss the situation in Newcastle.

I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that because the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) presently has concerns about the impact of any increase in the loading of the Newcastle sewerage system, it has agreed, as an interim measure, not to recommend connections to the sewer network apart from those previously consented or those on a like for like basis. NIW is currently developing design options and intends to discuss solutions with NIEA at the earliest opportunity in order to allow further consideration of the planning application restrictions. The upgrade of Newcastle Wastewater Treatment Works which is required to comply with the revised Bathing Water Directive has been identified as a high priority in the 2010-2013 funding period but remains subject to approval as part of the price control review in 2010. Upgrading of the sewerage network in Newcastle is ongoing and will continue within the existing funding period through to 2010.

NIW has arranged to make a presentation to Down District Council on Tuesday 26 May 2009 to explain the reason for the temporary restrictions on connections to the public sewer system and its proposals for resolving the situation.

I believe that this represents a sensible way forward.

It should be noted that while NIW is consulted by Planning Service about the availability of water and sewerage facilities during the normal planning process, a decision on whether or not a planning application should be approved is ultimately a matter for Planning Service.

Ulsterbus Foyle Day Ticket Passengers

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) how many Ulsterbus Foyle Day Ticket passengers made only one trip on each ticket in the past year; (ii) how many Foyle Day Ticket passengers took more than one trip on each ticket in the past year; (iii) what assessment has been made of the impact of its withdrawal on passenger numbers and revenues; and (iv) what consideration has been given to the removal of this ticket option to people on low incomes. (AQW 7834/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink has informed me that the information needed to answer points (i) and (ii) is not available as no additional usage information is recorded once a day ticket has been issued.

In relation to point (iii), Translink expects that passenger numbers will be largely unaffected by the withdrawal of the Day Ticket and that revenue will increase slightly as changes to the ticket type will reduce fraud and instances of abuse.

Alternative ticket options have been put in place so that users will not have to revert to purchasing single tickets. As a result, Translink considers that the removal of this ticket option will not have a significant adverse impact on people with low incomes.

Landscaping Roundabouts

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail how much money has been spent on landscaping roundabouts in each of the last five years. (AQW 7843/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service does not record separately the information requested by the Member. However, the Member will be aware that in many cases, roundabouts are maintained under agreement with local councils or under sponsorship by private firms.

Traffic Calming Measures

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the proposed public consultation on traffic calming measures in the Rathenraw estate, Antrim and a timeline for the implementation of this scheme. (AQW 7892/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I am pleased to inform you that a traffic calming scheme for the Rathenraw area in Antrim has been included in my Department's Roads Service's programme for the current financial year.

Initial design work on the scheme has been completed and consultation is currently being arranged. A meeting is being organised with the local residents' association, and should be held within the next few weeks. Following this, plans of the scheme will be exhibited in a local community office.

A letter drop will then be carried out within the area to inform residents of the scheme and inviting them to view the plans. A Roads Service official will be available at a specified time to discuss the scheme with members of the public. At the same time, a public notice will be published in local newspapers circulating in the area. This will allow members of the public 31 days to object to, or make other representation, in writing, to the Department. Roads Service will also inform Antrim Borough Council and the police of the proposed scheme.

It is anticipated, assuming that no objections to the works are received, and a contractor becomes available, that the work should be complete by the autumn of this year.

Knockmore Railway Line

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will (i) consider conducting a feasibility review on opening up the Knockmore railway line; and (ii) give details of any pending major work schemes to support the road infrastructure and accessibility to and from the International Airport. (AQW 7893/09)

Minister for Regional Development:

- (i) A study by an inter-departmental steering group in August 2007, which looked at the options for future railways investment in the North, found that there was no economic case at present for re-opening the line

between Knockmore and Antrim. The funding that is available for railway services is being focussed on other, priority areas.

I have, however, had discussions with the Kilbride Group, a private sector development company which has produced proposals for restoring the Antrim to Knockmore line, and I have indicated that I would consider part funding a Feasibility Study if the local Councils in the area were also willing to make a financial contribution to the study.

- (ii) As regards the roads infrastructure, my Department's Roads Service Investment Delivery Plan (IDP) outlines a £3.1 billion programme of investment in roads over the next 10-years, which will transform the strategic road network of the North. Whereas this is the largest ever programme of investment in our road system, resources are finite and choices have had to be made. These choices have been made in line with the guidance contained in the Regional Transportation Strategy and supporting Transport Plans.

While it has not been possible to include an upgrade of the link from the M2 to Belfast International Airport in the IDP, this proposal will be assessed along with other potential schemes for inclusion in future programmes. The IDP does, however, include schemes which will improve accessibility for passengers travelling to Belfast International Airport, including from the South of Ireland. For example, the scheme under construction between Beech Hill and Cloghogue at Newry will complete the dualling of the A1 from Sprucefield to the border and will significantly improve access from and to Belfast International Airport.

Accessibility to the Airport will also be further improved when the major improvements at the M1/Westlink, M2 and A4 (Dungannon – Ballygawley) are fully completed. Major dualling schemes are also planned for substantial sections of the A6 between Derry and Randalstown, and the A26 between Coleraine and Ballymena.

Sewerage System in Rasharkin

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development how many new houses will be connected to the main sewerage system in Rasharkin as a result of the work being carried out. (AQW 7915/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that around 70 new properties will be provided with first time sewerage services following the completion of work to upgrade the public sewerage system in Rasharkin. This work will also benefit the wider community and the environment by reducing the risk of flooding in the village.

Enterprise Service

Mrs Long asked the Minister for Regional Development for an estimate of the cost of providing separate generator functions to avoid the use of head-end power on the Enterprise service. (AQW 7925/09)

Minister for Regional Development: In conjunction with Iarnród Éireann, Translink are assessing a number of options for reconfiguring generator power supplies on Enterprise trains. The estimated costs at this time range from £1 million - £3 million. When final designs and costs are available a business case will be prepared to assess each option.

Enterprise Service

Mrs Long asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the progress in introducing a clock face timetable on the Enterprise, and to identify any potential stumbling blocks including additional rolling-stock requirements. (AQW 7926/09)

Minister for Regional Development: A business case was prepared by Northern Ireland Rail and Iarnród Éireann which examined the options for increasing the frequency of the Enterprise service to an hourly basis. Due to the capital and revenue cost of refurbishing and running surplus rolling stock held by Iarnród Éireann, no commitment was given to the introduction of frequency improvements in the foreseeable future. However, the two railways companies are exploring the scope for improving the reliability of the rolling stock on the Enterprise line.

Enterprise Service

Mrs Long asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail Translink's plans to introduce new rolling stock to facilitate additional Enterprise services. (AQW 7927/09)

Minister for Regional Development: A business case was prepared by Northern Ireland Rail and Iarnród Éireann which examined the options for increasing the frequency of the Enterprise service to an hourly basis. Due to the capital and revenue cost of refurbishing and running surplus rolling stock held by Iarnród Éireann, no commitment was given to the introduction of frequency improvements in the foreseeable future. There are, therefore, no plans to introduce new rolling stock to the Enterprise service. However, the two railways companies are exploring the scope for improving the reliability of the rolling stock on the Enterprise line.

DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Social Housing

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the contractors and companies from whom 'off the shelf' housing has been bought; and (ii) the amount her Department has paid to individual contractors and companies for social housing, since she came into office. (AQW 7709/09)

Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): In relation to (i) the names of the contractors/companies from whom 'off the shelf' housing has been bought are listed in the table below.

| | | | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Ardara Ltd | Beech Valley Developments | Connolly & Fee | New Quay Developments | N McKinnley |
| Hughes & Sons | Bramley Construction | M J Jordan | P McAvoy Contracts Ltd | Greene & O'Harte |
| Tully & Son | Maine Developments | Cancourt Developments | Largie Developments | Moore Bros Construction |
| O'Hagan Construction | Kevin Watson Group | Gallagher Bros. | William Rodgers | Jamesons Group |
| UPS | Braidwater Construction | A Donaghy | Brookdale Property Developments Ltd | Kelly Brothers |
| Black & White Developments | Polly Brothers | Western Builders | McKenna & McKibben | Colm Meehan |
| Galgorm Group Properties | NMC Developments Ltd | Fernheath Developments Ltd | L Smyth Builder/Developer | Boconnell Properties |
| Bush Developments, NI Ltd | TAL Construction | Eglinton Construction | MBC Ltd | Moss Construction |
| Micwall Developments | P K Murphy | Carville group | Heathom Properties Ltd | Pacific Wharf Holdings |
| Glentor Developments | O'Hanlon & McSherry | Vincent Developments | Windyridge Developments | Alan Elliott Donaghadee |
| Dixon Contracts Dunloy | | | | |

In relation to (ii) the amount paid to individual contractors and companies is deemed commercially sensitive and has not been provided. However, the total amount of Housing Association grant paid by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to Housing Associations in respect of "off the shelf" housing in the period was as follows:

| | | |
|---------|---|-------------|
| 2007/08 | - | £35,275,780 |
| 2008/09 | - | £29,862,527 |

Social Housing

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development, in each of the last two years, the number of properties for social housing need her Department has (i) purchased; and (ii) sold. (AQW 7734/09)

Minister for Social Development: The table below details the total number of social housing properties purchased and sold by Housing Associations and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in each of the last two years:

| Year | Purchased | Sold |
|---------|-----------|------|
| 2007/08 | 613 | 872 |
| 2008/09 | 522 | 60 |

Social Security Tribunal Hearings

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development the average cost of a Social Security Tribunal hearing. (AQW 7737/09)

Minister for Social Development: In 2008/09 the average cost of a hearing including all administrative expenses was £283.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Social Development how many Warm Homes Scheme grants were awarded to homes in the Upper Bann area, for each month, in each of the last three years. (AQW 7747/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the table below.

| | Heating | Insulation | Total Jobs | Heating Value | Insulation Value | Total Value |
|--------------|------------|------------|-------------|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Apr-06 | 10 | 18 | | £37,572.00 | £11,693.00 | |
| May-06 | 10 | 41 | | £32,391.00 | £24,023.00 | |
| Jun-06 | 15 | 50 | | £51,276.00 | £22,014.00 | |
| Jul-06 | 15 | 47 | | £50,546.00 | £22,126.00 | |
| Aug-06 | 9 | 87 | | £27,642.00 | £49,555.00 | |
| Sep-06 | 26 | 40 | | £91,960.00 | £21,900.00 | |
| Oct-06 | 50 | 66 | | £179,305.00 | £40,209.00 | |
| Nov-06 | 60 | 48 | | £228,806.00 | £18,897.00 | |
| Dec-06 | 39 | 53 | | £145,483.00 | £27,839.00 | |
| Jan-07 | 68 | 68 | | £253,399.00 | £32,959.00 | |
| Feb-07 | 34 | 75 | | £130,879.00 | £35,942.00 | |
| Mar-07 | 45 | 70 | | £179,074.00 | £33,169.00 | |
| Total | 381 | 663 | 1044 | £1,408,333.00 | £340,326.00 | £1,748,659.00 |

| | Heating | Insulation | Total Jobs | Heating Value | Insulation Value | Total Value |
|--------|---------|------------|------------|---------------|------------------|-------------|
| Apr-07 | 34 | 54 | | £139,041.00 | £28,019.00 | |
| May-07 | 33 | 73 | | £143,213.00 | £37,072.00 | |
| Jun-07 | 20 | 56 | | £91,284.00 | £27,901.00 | |
| Jul-07 | 42 | 41 | | £206,044.00 | £21,129.00 | |
| Aug-07 | 39 | 72 | | £177,802.00 | £33,921.00 | |
| Sep-07 | 37 | 52 | | £155,892.00 | £27,524.00 | |
| Oct-07 | 60 | 110 | | £230,336.00 | £45,299.00 | |

| | | | | | | |
|--------------|------------|------------|-------------|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Nov-07 | 37 | 106 | | £133,456.00 | £39,892.00 | |
| Dec-07 | 36 | 100 | | £141,108.00 | £43,393.00 | |
| Jan-08 | 30 | 45 | | £109,324.00 | £22,374.00 | |
| Feb-08 | 26 | 57 | | £94,830.00 | £28,224.00 | |
| Mar-08 | 15 | 27 | | £52,791.00 | £13,510.00 | |
| Total | 409 | 793 | 1202 | £1,675,121.00 | £368,258.00 | £2,043,379.00 |

| | Heating | Insulation | Total Jobs | Heating Value | Insulation Value | Total Value |
|--------------|------------|------------|-------------|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Apr-08 | 11 | 63 | | £40,021.00 | £33,879.00 | |
| May-08 | 10 | 62 | | £39,862.00 | £31,958.00 | |
| Jun-08 | 46 | 63 | | £197,503.00 | £36,742.00 | |
| Jul-08 | 58 | 75 | | £245,867.00 | £44,329.00 | |
| Aug-08 | 51 | 80 | | £222,571.00 | £40,726.00 | |
| Sep-08 | 27 | 73 | | £113,701.00 | £30,688.00 | |
| Oct-08 | 46 | 92 | | £183,069.00 | £54,086.00 | |
| Nov-08 | 22 | 66 | | £83,521.00 | £42,334.00 | |
| Dec-08 | 10 | 40 | | £39,078.00 | £23,477.00 | |
| Jan-09 | 40 | 80 | | £150,014.00 | £49,507.00 | |
| Feb-09 | 21 | 73 | | £77,840.00 | £39,608.00 | |
| Mar-09 | 17 | 24 | | £62,924.00 | £14,966.00 | |
| Total | 359 | 791 | 1150 | £1,455,971.00 | £442,300.00 | £1,898,271.00 |

Housing Executive Bungalows

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications for Housing Executive three bed bungalows have been made in each of the last three years, that have not resulted in the allocation of such a property. (AQW 7752/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested. The number of applications made for Housing Executive three bedroom ground floor accommodation (which includes three bedroom bungalows) in each of the last three years, that did not result in the allocation of such a property, is as follows:-

2006/07 - 53
 2007/08 - 55
 2008/09 - 103

Housing Executive Bungalows

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications for Housing Executive three bed bungalows have been made, in each of the last three years. (AQW 7753/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested. The number of applications made for Housing Executive three bedroom ground floor accommodation (which includes three bedroom bungalows) in each of the last three years is as follows:-

2006/07 - 140
 2007/08 - 112
 2208/09 - 123

Strategic Business Review

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development, with regard to the Strategic Business Review, will the Department of Education and Learning be taking over more of the maintainance and general running costs of local offices in the future. (AQW 7757/09)

Minister for Social Development: It is normal Northern Ireland Civil Service practice for the largest occupier of a building to take on the responsibility for managing the premises on a day to day basis. Currently the Department for Social Development carries out this function in all local offices. With regard to the Strategic Business Review the situation would be re-assessed jointly with the Department for Employment and Learning following the Minister's decision on the public consultation.

Bangor Town Centre

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on her Department's work on a masterplan for Bangor Town Centre. [R] (AQW 7762/09)

Minister for Social Development: My Department has drawn up a Terms of Reference for the Bangor Masterplan in conjunction with North Down Borough Council and other key stakeholders in the town. We are progressing rapidly through the necessary processes for the approval of the expenditure involved. If the expenditure is approved, the next stage will be to appoint a consultancy team through the Government procurement process.

Bangor Town Centre

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on the timescale for the various stages in the development of a masterplan for Bangor Town Centre. [R] (AQW 7763/09)

Minister for Social Development: My Department has submitted a business case to DFP requesting approval for the expenditure in carrying out a masterplan for Bangor. I anticipate a decision from DFP by the end of May 2009. If approved, a consultancy team will be commissioned through the Central Procurement Directorate consultancy framework. That process takes 5/6 weeks. Masterplan assignments typically take 6 months to complete from appointment of the consultancy team. Therefore, if DFP approval is granted this month, the consultancy team should be appointed in July 2009 and the assignment completed in January 2010.

Shared Neighbourhood Programme

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on the development of a shared neighbourhood in Loughview/Reburn, Holywood (AQW 7764/09)

Minister for Social Development: I can confirm that the Loughview/Redburn area of Holywood is being considered to participate in the Shared Neighbourhood Programme and I expect to make an announcement in the coming weeks.

Shared Neighbourhood Programme

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Social Development if her Department has any plans to develop a shared neighbourhood in any of the Housing Executive estates in Bangor. (AQW 7765/09)

Minister for Social Development: I can confirm that we are looking at the potential of existing Housing Executive estates in Bangor for inclusion in Phase 3 of our Shared Neighbourhood Programme to be delivered during 2010/2011. However, it is much too early in that process to be any more specific at this time.

Social Housing

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the review of the financial and economic options for the better delivery of social and affordable housing in Northern Ireland, conducted by Baroness Ford, and the time-scale for the publication of her report. (AQW 7766/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information from this report was helpful in developing aspects of the New Housing Agenda which I announced in February 2008. The report also covers sensitive commercial information and a wide range of policy issues that continue to be taken forward.

The report also discussed means of introducing a higher level of private finance into housing. I have already acted on some of these and am taking forward others. I do not propose to release the report at present. However, when the policy development work is completed I shall certainly do so.

Ards Development Bureau

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what the Ards Development Bureau does for community groups. (AQW 7776/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Ards Development Bureau and Community Network is a 'sub-regional' organisation providing support services, networking opportunities, capacity building, facilities and resources to groups and organisations throughout the Ards Borough area.

Ards Development Bureau

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development, for each of the last three years, how much funding Ards Development Bureau received. (AQW 7777/09)

Minister for Social Development: I am unable to provide details of all the funding Ards Development Bureau and Community Network has been awarded. However, I can provide you with details of the funding awarded by my own Department and that which is listed on the Government Funder's Database.

| | |
|---|---|
| Peace II Extension 2006-2008 | Ards Community Capacity Building Programme £128,695 |
| DSD Community Investment Fund 2007-2009 | Core Costs £136,818.76 |
| DSD Community Investment Fund 2009-2010 | Core Costs £65,000 |

Ards Development Bureau

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the Ards Development Bureau, (i) how much funding has it passed down to community groups; and (ii) which community groups have received funding. (AQW 7778/09)

Minister for Social Development: No funding has been passed from Ards Development Bureau and Community Network to any other community group in relation to the grants received from my Department.

In relation to details on the funding received under the Peace II Extension as noted in AQW 7777/09, I must refer you to the appropriate funder, in this instance the Community Foundation Northern Ireland, as my Department did not administer or manage this funding programme. I am advised that under this programme Ards Development Bureau & Community Network were funded to support capacity building and community development with three local communities, which included financial assistance with some basic administration and running costs.

Rent Arrears

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) how many tenants are still in rent arrears as a result of the former heating plant in the Twinbrook estate; and (ii) how much is owed in arrears by tenants to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. (AQW 7795/09)

Minister for Social Development: There are no current Housing Executive tenants in rent arrears as a result of the former heating plant in the Twinbrook estate. However, 4 former tenants of the Twinbrook Estate still have District Heating arrears within the Housing Executive's Lisburn Dairy Farm Office area. At 30 April 2009, the total rent arrears owed by current and former tenants of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive was £14,270,553.

Stroke Survivors

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development to outline how her Department, in co-operation with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, is making it easier for stroke survivors to access benefits. (AQW 7800/09)

Minister for Social Development: Depending on the individual circumstances, a range of social security benefits are available to people who have had a stroke, including Disability Living Allowance, Attendance Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance, Incapacity Benefit and income-related benefits, such as Income Support, Pension Credit and Housing Benefit.

The Housing Executive works closely with health and social care professionals to ensure there is an awareness of the services they provide for the disabled, including the Housing Benefit Service. In this way, when a care package is being developed for an individual, any entitlement to Housing Benefit can be explored and prepared for and any resulting claim can be dealt with promptly and effectively.

The Social Security Agency as part of its day to day business provides a range of services, including information and advice on benefit entitlement that meet the needs of individual customers. Depending on the benefit being claimed customers are able to complete a claim form in different ways, including opting for a telephone interview which can be arranged at a mutually agreed time, arranging an appointment to have the form completed at a face-to-face interview or, using the Department for Social Development's internet site, complete and submit a form on-line.

Front-Office and Back-Office Services

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the front-office and back-office services currently provided at (i) Jobs and Benefits offices; and (ii) Social Security offices in (a) Larne; (b) Carrickfergus; and (iii) Newtownabbey. (AQW 7819/09)

Minister for Social Development: Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey offices are Jobs & Benefits offices. As part of the government's modernisation service, the Agency in partnership with the Department for Employment and Learning has introduced a Jobs and Benefits service for customers served by Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey offices. The service provides an integrated work-focused service to people of working age putting the emphasis on getting people into work and helping them tackle their barriers to employment.

The main SSA services provided by these offices are listed in the table below:

| Office | Back Office | Front Office |
|---------------|--|---|
| Larne | Jobseekers Allowance Income Support (for Larne and Carrickfergus) | Information and advice |
| | | Claims taking |
| | | Social Fund Crisis loans |
| | | Finance service for the issue of clerical payments. |
| Carrickfergus | Jobseekers Allowance | Information and advice |
| | | Claims taking |
| | | Social Fund Crisis loans |
| | | Finance service for the issue of clerical payments. |

| Office | Back Office | Front Office |
|--------------|--|---|
| Newtownabbey | Jobseekers Allowance Income Support | Information and advice |
| | | Claims taking |
| | | Social Fund Crisis loans |
| | | Finance service for the issue of clerical payments. |

Removal of Bridge Over the Sixmilewater River

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the proposals to remove the derelict bridge over the Sixmilewater River at Grangers Mill in Antrim. (AQW 7841/09)

Minister for Social Development: I understand that a recent Rivers Agency's investigation into flood flow levels determined that normal flows and flows up to 1:50 years are unlikely to be affected by the bridge. The Rivers Agency has also commissioned a study into the cause of last years flooding which will include the bridge's impact, if any, on flood risk. A decision on the future of the bridge will be made when the results of this study are known.

I have instructed officials to keep you informed.

Child Support

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of men who have paid child support in respect of children where subsequent evidence revealed they were not the biological fathers; (ii) the sum total of payments made by these men; (iii) whether these men were reimbursed for the payments; (iv) if any monies were recovered from the mothers involved in these cases; (v) whether any compensation was paid to the individuals involved; (vi) the sum total of any compensation paid; and (vii) which Department or body paid the compensation, in the last 10 years. (AQW 7842/09)

Minister for Social Development: There have been and continue to be a small number of cases in which the Non Resident Parent questions paternity after a formal assessment has been made (post assessment). Information is available for year 2008-2009, however to go back further than last year would necessitate a significant resource requirement which would identify a small number of individual cases.

In 2008-2009, 5 men paid child maintenance in respect of children where subsequent evidence revealed they were not the biological fathers.

The sum total of payments received from these men was £4065.94. This amount compares to a total of £22.81 million child maintenance collected/arranged at the end of March 2009.

In each case the amounts paid were reimbursed.

Recovery of monies was not sought from the Parents With Care involved. The welfare of the child/children is always considered in such cases

No compensation was paid as the Division acted in good faith and the Alleged Non Resident Parents had initially accepted paternity.

Compensation was not paid by any Department or body.

Employment and Support Allowance

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the Employment and Support Allowance, if a GP provides evidence to the effect that a person is unable to attend a medical examination due to medical reasons, why this is not acceptable to the medical referee. (AQW 7859/09)

Minister for Social Development: If a customer is unable to attend a medical examination due to illness, the case will be considered by a decision maker to determine if the customer has shown 'good cause' for the non-attendance. The decision will not be made by the health care professional. If the customer provides specific

medical evidence from a GP to show they are incapable of attending a medical examination, the decision maker will normally accept that 'good cause' for non-attendance has been proved. In these circumstances a further appointment for a medical examination will be arranged.

If a customer's medical condition is such that they consider they will never be able to attend a medical examination, and they provide specific evidence from a GP to support this, the case will be referred to a Medical Officer for consideration. If the evidence provided is deemed to be sufficient the Medical Officer will instruct that a domiciliary visit be arranged to complete the medical examination.

Employment and Support Allowance

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to Employment and Support Allowance appeals, what procedures a tribunal follows if a client is unable to attend. (AQW 7860/09)

Minister for Social Development: My Department does not have a role in such matters as appeal tribunals are independent judicial bodies composed of members taken from a panel appointed by the Lord Chancellor. In the circumstances, the Member may wish to write directly to the President of Appeal Tribunals at 6th floor, Cleaver House, 3 Donegall Square North, Belfast, BT1 5GA for a response.

Employment and Support Allowance

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to Employment and Support Allowance, what measures her Department has taken to ensure that people whose allowance has been disallowed are given alternative resources until the review or appeal process is completed. (AQW 7861/09)

Minister for Social Development: A person who is appealing against a decision that they do not have limited capability for work can continue to receive Employment and Support Allowance at the assessment phase rate pending the outcome of the appeal as long as they continue to provide medical evidence. Alternatively, a person who is disallowed Employment and Support Allowance and is still out of work may claim Jobseeker's Allowance or Income Support depending on the individual circumstances.

Larne Masterplan

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development when the Larne Masterplan will be completed. (AQW 7880/09)

Minister for Social Development: In May 2008, my Department commissioned consultants to produce a masterplan for Larne. Whilst a significant amount of work has been undertaken, the masterplan cannot be finalised until the results of a retail capacity study are available.

These results will be available in early July 2009. This will allow the consultant to produce a draft copy of the Masterplan for public consultation by the end of the summer. I anticipate that the completed Masterplan for Larne will be published by the end of 2009.

Crisis Loans

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (i) the maximum amount permitted for a crisis loan; (ii) the number of crisis loans approved; (iii) the amount of monies paid, in 2008/09; and in the current financial year to date. (AQW 7884/09)

Minister for Social Development: A Crisis Loan can be awarded where it is the only means of preventing a serious risk to health and safety. Where the award is to meet the need for immediate living expenses the maximum amount payable is an amount equivalent to 75% of the amount of Income Support, Employment and Support Allowance, or income-based Jobseekers Allowance appropriate to the customer's circumstances. Where the award is to meet the need for services or items the maximum payable is £1500.

The table below details the number of crisis loans awarded and the associated expenditure in 2008/09 and the current financial year to date.

| | 2008/2009 | 2009/2010 * |
|----------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| No of Crisis Loans Awarded | 101,271 | 9,433 |
| Crisis Loan Expenditure | £12,321,510 | £1,131,043 |

* Latest data available up to 30 April 2009.

Crisis Loans

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Social Development to clarify whether foreign nationals are permitted to claim for a crisis loan immediately upon arrival, or if they must be resident or employed for a required period of time before being eligible to do so. (AQW 7885/09)

Minister for Social Development: Non-EEA nationals, persons subject to immigration control and persons who are treated as a person from abroad for benefit purposes are eligible to claim an interest-free Crisis Loan from the Social Fund without the need to have been resident or employed in Northern Ireland for a specific period of time. However, a loan will only be paid if it is needed to alleviate the consequences of a disaster.

Co-Ownership Housing

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications for co-ownership housing were (i) submitted; and (ii) successful in 2006/07, 2007/08, 2008/09 and 2009/10 to date, in the Upper Bann constituency. (AQW 7890/09)

Minister for Social Development: Co-Ownership Housing has advised me that it records statistics according to local council area, rather than by constituency. The table below details the information requested in both the Craigavon and Banbridge council areas which are situated, at least in part, in the Upper Bann constituency.

| Year | Applications made | Successful |
|----------|-------------------|------------|
| 2006/07 | 26 | 18 |
| 2007/08 | 208 | 119 |
| 2008/091 | 43 | 31 |
| 2009/102 | 34 | 7 |

1. The number of applications for the 2008/09 financial year was affected by the suspension of new applications to the scheme between April and November 2008.
2. The figures for applications reflect activity for the full month of April and part of May. The figure for applications made includes only completed forms that have been processed.

Credit Cards Issued to Departmental Staff

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how many credit cards have been issued to her Department's staff for work purposes; and (ii) in relation to punitive bank charges on these cards, (a) how many has there been; (b) the total cost of the charges; and (c) the reasons for the charges, in each of the last five years. (AQW 7903/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Department for Social Development and its Agencies do not hold or issue to staff any credit cards.

Departmental Spend on Consultants

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Social Development how much his Department has spent on internal and external consultants, in each of the last three years. (AQW 7937/09)

Minister for Social Development: The total cost of employing external consultants within the Department for Social Development (including the Social Security Agency and Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division) amounts to £640,518 for 2006/07, £760,597 for 2007/08 and £1,929,236 for 2008/09.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Lord and Lady Craigavon's Tomb

Mr Elliott asked the Assembly Commission how it encourages people coming to Parliament Buildings to pay a visit to Lord and Lady Craigavon's tomb. (AQW 7712/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Moutray): Lord and Lady Craigavon's tomb has been an integral element in the official tour script since 1999. In addition, it is established practice for Events and Education office staff conducting official tours to highlight the tomb and its location for those wishing to visit it.

Lord and Lady Craigavon's Tomb

Mr Elliott asked the Assembly Commission if it will consider adding a visit to Lord and Lady Craigavon's tomb as a non-compulsory part of the tours of Parliament Buildings. (AQW 7713/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Moutray): Present arrangements provide for those visitors wishing to avail of the option to visit the tomb, and tour guests are advised of the tomb's location as outlined above. Nonetheless, and to ensure tour guests are fully aware of the option, official tour guests will be informed specifically that they can visit the tomb if they wish.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 5 June 2009

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Maze Project

Mr McNarry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give an undertaking that land sold as part of the Maze project will be valued at the market rate at the time of an agreement to purchase. (AQW 7847/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr McGuinness): The Land and Property Services Agency of the Department of Finance and Personnel provide market valuations of Executive properties being considered for sale. Should any land be considered for sale at Maze/Long Kesh we would seek a market valuation by the Agency.

Child Poverty

Mrs Long asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the creation of a baseline system of measurement for severe child poverty. (AQW 7866/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: A method to measure the level of severe child poverty has been outlined in a paper for consideration by the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People.

Once agreed by the Ministerial Sub-Committee and the Executive, the method will be used to monitor levels of severe child poverty.

Credit Cards

Mr Burns asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) how many credit cards have been issued to its staff for work purposes; and (ii) in relation to punitive bank charges on these cards, (a) how many has there been; (b) the total cost of the charges; and (c) the reasons for the charges, in each of the last five years. (AQW 7907/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

- (i) The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has issued 14 credit cards (Government Procurement Cards) to officials for work purposes.
- (ii) (a) and (b) There have been 6 punitive bank charges incurred on these cards over the last five years amounting to £1,738.
- (ii) (c) These charges were as a result of the late payment of bills during the immediate transition to a new accounting system for the Department in 2007-08. These initial processing issues have now been resolved. In addition, all monthly balances on these cards are now paid by direct debit to ensure that late payment charges are not incurred.

Legislation

Mr D Bradley asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of pieces of draft legislation from its Department that have been discussed at the Executive Committee in 2009. (AQO 2835/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We refer the Member to the answer given to the Member for South Antrim to AQO 2832/09.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when it will present its strategy on Cohesion, Sharing and Integration. (AQO 2838/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Improving relationships between and within all communities and building a shared and better future remains a high priority for OFMDFM and the Executive. We have reflected this priority in the Strategic Priorities of the Programme for Government and as one of the Programme's two cross-cutting themes. 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. We have been delivering substantial additional funding secured in the Executive's budget. 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.

Special European Union Programmes Body

Mr Dallat asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on recent funding applications granted by the special European Union Programmes Body. (AQO 2839/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Special EU Programmes Body has responsibility for the delivery of the PEACE III Programme and funding applications.

PEACE III Programme Steering Committees have to date approved ninety-nine applications with a combined value of approximately £140 million / €153 million. This represents almost half of the total funds available. Seventy-eight letters of offer have been issued.

INTERREG IVA Steering Committees have approved thirty-three applications with a combined value of approximately £138 million, representing almost 60 per cent of the total programme value. Sixteen letters of offer have been issued.

Bill of Rights

Mrs Hanna asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the discussions it has had with the Secretary of State in relation to a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. (AQO 2841/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We have not had discussions with the Secretary of State in relation to a Bill of Rights. We anticipate that the Secretary of State will write to us, in due course, seeking our views. We will, in turn, want to seek the views of the Executive, given the cross-cutting nature of the issues.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide a timetable for the publication of the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration strategy. (AQO 2844/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We refer the Member to the answer to AQO 2838/09. Our comments then are equally applicable to this question.

Economy

Mr Newton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps the Executive is taking to deal with the economic downturn. (AQO 2845/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We announced a package of measures to address the economic downturn in the Assembly on 15th December 2008 which included measures to address problems in five key areas: energy and fuel poverty; debt and unemployment; the rising cost of living for households; support for the housing and construction sectors; and support for business. We brought forward a Financial Assistance Bill to allow us to react quickly to emerging problems and difficulties.

During the course of last year we met with a series of stakeholder groups to learn directly of the core problems and difficulties arising from the development of the economic downturn. To develop and build upon this dialogue we have established an economic taskforce under the title of the Cross Sector Advisory Forum. In addition, we have met with the four main banks in recent months where we discussed how they were responding to the credit crunch in Northern Ireland. Further meetings are being arranged with the building societies and Barclays.

We are acutely aware that this is a difficult time for local people and businesses. The Executive is monitoring the economic crisis and we aim to do all that we can to protect local interests from the worst effects of this economic turmoil.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy

Ms Lo asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the impact the delay in the publication of the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration strategy has had on racial equality. (AQO 2846/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Whilst we continue to develop our detailed proposals for a Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration, we also continue to implement the strategic approach of the current Racial Equality Strategy 2005-10. We certainly consider that the six shared aims of the Racial Equality Strategy remain current and robust, especially given the increasing diversity of our population in recent years.

You will be aware of the practical work to improve racial equality and create good race relations that has also continued to be promoted by OFMDFM. For example, the Migrant Workers thematic sub-group has continued to operate, and its work has been widely welcomed, including the Migrant Workers Strategy and Action plan.

You will also be aware of how, in terms of resourcing racial equality, Junior Ministers recently announced the recipients of a funding package worth more than £1million to support the integration of minority ethnic communities. The funding package of £1,046,894 was awarded to 27 different organisations over the 2009/10 financial year, representing an increase of 10% on funding provided in 2008/09.

The work of these 27 organisations is a practical response to the increasing diversity of our population and it clearly demonstrates our commitment to promoting racial equality and good race relations.

Special European Union Programmes Body

Mr Maginness asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline its role in the process of allocating Special European Union Programmes Body funding. (AQO 2847/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Department's role in respect of PEACE III funding is that of Accountable Department and it is also represented in the decision-making process of funding awards through participation in the Steering Groups related to Priorities 1.1 – Building Positive Relationships at the local level; Priority 1.2 – Acknowledging and dealing with the past and Priority 2.2 Key institutional capacities are developed for a shared society.

Child Poverty: Funding

Mrs O'Neill asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of an Executive Programme Fund to help ensure that the Executive meets its targets in relation to child poverty. (AQO 2848/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Tackling poverty and disadvantage is highlighted as one of our priorities within the Programme for Government 2008-2011 and as a theme that cuts across Departmental boundaries. Currently departments are required, in line with Public Expenditure guidelines, to consider data and research available on poverty when allocating resources to programmes to ensure resources and efforts are directed to those in greatest need.

It will be the responsibility of the Executive Sub-Committee on Poverty and Social Inclusion to agree priorities and actions necessary to meet child poverty targets.

It would also be for the Executive and the Assembly to decide on how it will resource these priorities and actions and whether an Executive Programme Fund would help ensure the Executive meets its targets in relation to child poverty.

European Commission

Mr P Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action it is taking at European level, to ensure that Northern Ireland remains on the agenda of the European Union ahead of the appointment of a new Commission later this year. (AQO 2849/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Since the restoration of devolution and President Barroso's announcement setting up the European Commission's Northern Ireland Task Force, we have been aware that our small region has attracted a high level of attention from the European Institutions. Maintaining that level of attention is clearly important.

In meetings with Commission President Barroso we have developed a clear understanding that the Taskforce will exist until 2013, beyond the life of the current Commission. However, for the Taskforce to be effective, an ongoing programme of work is required, including visits by Ministers and officials to build and maintain key relationships. As part of that engagement, we are currently working on a series of visits that will include senior NICS officials travelling to Brussels, a Ministerial visit to Brussels by the Junior Ministers, and a Commission Taskforce visit here. The momentum achieved by these events will help maintain attention on us when the new Commission is appointed.

Executive Ministers are able to play a role in negotiations at Council where there is a clear devolved interest and OFMDFM and DARD officials in Brussels can support Executive Ministers when they participate in Council. The Agriculture Minister has attended Council on several occasions to ensure our interests are taken into account.

Depending on the outcome of the Irish Government's referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, it is envisaged that the European Parliament will gain significant new powers in several areas of importance to Northern Ireland, but most particularly in agriculture and fisheries. OFMDFM officials, in co-operation with colleagues from Whitehall, Scotland and Wales, are currently considering how best to develop engagement with the European Parliament post Lisbon.

Our work with each of the 3 main Institutions helps to keep our place near the top of the European agenda.

Policing and Justice Powers

Mr McKay asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the transfer of Policing and Justice. (AQO 2850/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Preparations for the devolution of policing and justice powers have progressed in line with the process paper which we made public following our attendance at the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) on 18 November last year. On 20 January 2009, the Assembly approved a report from the AERC on the arrangements for the devolution of policing and justice matters. It endorsed our view that there should be a single justice department with a single Minister elected by the Assembly. The Committee is currently working on a second report dealing with a broad range of other issues, including financial provisions,

which need to be resolved before devolution can happen. Legislation has been enacted at Westminster to make the necessary legislative amendments arising from our decisions announced on 18 November 2008 and from the AERC report. The Secretary of State has also made an order to increase the maximum permitted number of Ministerial offices to accommodate a Minister of Justice. Officials have held discussions with DFP, the NIO, the NI Court Service and Whitehall departments on future financial arrangements to support the functions which would transfer on devolution.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Belfast Flooding Stakeholder Group

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the Belfast Flooding Stakeholder group established by the Rivers Agency including details of (i) its membership; (ii) the number of meetings held to date; (iii) plans for future meetings; and (iv) its forward work plan. [R] (AQW 7785/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): The Belfast Stakeholder Group was established to assist in taking forward the preparation and implementation of the Belfast Flood Risk Management Study. Membership of the Group includes representatives from NI Water, Roads Service, NI Environment Agency, Belfast Resilience Forum, Belfast Harbour Commissioners and Rivers Agency. The inaugural meeting of the Group is scheduled for the 3rd July 2009 and the frequency of future meetings will be considered at this meeting. The Terms of Reference for the Group, when agreed, will assist in the development of forward work plans and programmes for the Group.

Given that the study is at data acquisition stage, currently representation is from core stakeholders. However, there is flexibility to co-opt other interested parties as the study progresses and work programmes are clarified.

Animal Abuse

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures she is taking to end animal abuse. (AQW 7852/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department has an important and active role in developing national and EU animal welfare legislation and in educating livestock keepers in standards of animal welfare. Owners and keepers of farmed animals are required to comply fully with domestic and EU legislation, which sets down minimum standards for keeping farm animals.

The legislation contains specific requirements relating to record keeping, freedom of movement, buildings, equipment, feeding and watering of animals. Farm animal welfare inspections are carried out by my Department's Veterinary Service against these standards. Farm animals may also be assessed in markets, in slaughterhouses and during transport against legal requirements, and enforcement is used where appropriate. Under the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (NI) 2000, my officials can serve a Notice to a keeper setting out what steps are necessary to improve the welfare of their animals. This is an effective tool for seeking to ensure an animal's needs are met. Failure to comply with a Notice can lead to prosecution.

My Department's Veterinary Service also investigates welfare complaints from members of the public, and carries out targeted farm inspections if welfare issues are identified by a Veterinary Officer working in an abattoir. Farms with a history of welfare violations are revisited on a regular basis to ensure that corrective action has been taken and maintained. In the most serious cases of animal welfare abuse, my Department will prosecute offenders and has done so successfully on 31 occasions in the last two years.

My Department also produces Codes of Recommendations for the Welfare of Livestock. These provide advice and guidance for the upkeep of farm animals and details of relevant legislation. Livestock farmers and employers are required by law to ensure that all those attending to their livestock are familiar with, and have access to, the relevant Codes.

In addition, my Officials work closely with the PSNI which is responsible for enforcing animal welfare legislation with regards to non-farmed animals.

In recognition that current animal welfare legislation here is perhaps not as robust as it should be, I have already stated that it is my intention to bring forward a new Animal Welfare Bill. A Review of current legislation is nearing completion and I will shortly be examining all the evidence presented to me. I expect to be in a position shortly after the Summer Recess to seek Executive approval to bring forward the Bill.

Animal Identification Ear Tags

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many animal identification ear tags were replaced in 2007/08 and what was the cost in terms of expense to farmers. (AQW 7872/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: In total, 272,016 replacement ear tag authorisations were issued in 2007/08. The cost to farmers would be in the order of £3.50 per individual tag, if ordered singly.

I have recently agreed a change to the rules surrounding replacement tags which negates the requirement for a replacement tag in cases of animals arriving at a meat plant with only one ear tag.

Animal Tagging System

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the adequacy and cost effectiveness of the present animal tagging system. (AQW 7873/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: It is essential for the success of our farming industry and also mandatory under EU animal health and food legislation, that effective animal traceability is achieved. Regarding cattle, we are fully compliant with Council Regulation 1760/2000, which lays down a traceability system throughout the EU, requiring cattle to be double tagged, with one tag in each ear. However, I am well aware of the drawbacks of an animal identification system based on conventional eartags. These can include errors through visual reading and manual recording of tag numbers along with the cost and inconvenience of reading and recording this information, and of course there is the risk of tags themselves being lost or removed.

The industry here is considering the introduction of electronic identification (EID) of cattle to address some of these issues. Cattle EID is also under active consideration in Brussels and I am watching developments closely.

I have recently made improvements to our cattle traceability policy to ensure that keepers can avail of the opportunity to prove the identity of an animal, as required by EU legislation, through the use of DNA testing. By allowing the identity of animals to be established in this way, fewer cattle will be restricted on-farm and all eligible cattle can be accepted for human consumption. I have also agreed in consultation with the industry that cattle which have lost an ear tag en route to the slaughter plant may proceed to slaughter without an additional replacement tag being required in the lairage.

My officials have also worked with tag suppliers, and officials in the South, to ensure a standard system of numbering and bar-coding on cattle tags, passports and the advance electronic transmission of this information to facilitate all-Island trade and onward movements to the EU.

Regarding sheep, our plans for the introduction of EID are well advanced in line with the EU requirement to have EID in place across the EU from the end of this year. I am working to ensure that changes are made at EU level to the detailed rules of this system so that it is as simple and straightforward as possible.

As regards future developments on the identification of animals, I am supporting the work of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) on evaluating systems for retinal scanning, which will contribute to traceability by providing a reliable means of maintaining an animal's identity.

Divisional Veterinary Office in Larne

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she will make her final decision on the closure of her Department's Larne office. (AQW 7878/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: An analysis of a number of locational options for a DARD Direct office to provide farmer focussed services in South and East Antrim has recently been completed. I will shortly be reviewing this along with feedback from key stakeholders representing customers and staff with a view to announcing the final location in June.

Departmental Spend on Consultants

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much her Department has spent on internal and external consultants, in each of the last three years. (AQW 7896/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department of Agriculture has incurred no expenditure in the last three years on internal consultants.

Expenditure incurred by the Department on external consultants in the last three years is as follows:-

| Year | 06/07 | 07/08 | 08/09 |
|-------------|----------|----------|----------|
| Total Spend | £780,000 | £480,121 | £886,000 |

Departmental Consultations

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much her Department spent on (i) Public Notices for consultations in local or regional newspapers; and (ii) other forms of media for consultations, in each of the past three years. (AQW 7939/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The following table outlines Departmental expenditure.

| Financial Year | Cost of Public Notices | Cost of other forms of Media |
|----------------|------------------------|------------------------------|
| 2008/09 | £23,700 | - |
| 2007/08 | £15,498 | - |
| 2006/07 | £5,946 | - |

Credit Cards

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in each of the last five years (i) how many credit cards have been issued to her Department's staff for work purposes; and (ii) in relation to punitive bank charges on these cards, (a) how many there has been; (b) the total cost of the charges; and (c) the reasons for the charges. (AQW 7964/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My department uses the Government Procurement Card which officers use for work purposes.

The number of cards issued in each of the last 5 years is as follows:

- 2004/05 - 3 issued
- 2005/06 - 1 issued
- 2006/07 - 4 issued
- 2007/08 - 3 issued
- 2008/09 - 7 issued

There have been 11 charges over the 5 year period totalling £96.63 for interest due to late payment.

Cleaning Products

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans her Department has to purchase cleaning, household or toiletry products which, including their contents, have not been tested on animals. (AQW 7967/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: In line with procurement procedures, the Department purchases all cleaning, household and toiletry products from cleaning and/or supplies contracts managed by Central Procurement Directorate in the Department of Finance and Personnel. The contracts stipulate that products must be fit for purpose and environmentally friendly – there is no reference to animal testing.

However the Executive has brought forward new procurement guidelines which ensure social, sustainable and environmental aspects are fully considered and I will endeavour to ensure that these guidelines are implemented by my Department at the contract renewal date.

Divisional Veterinary Office in Larne

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if her Department has investigated the possibility of relocating staff from the Divisional Veterinary/DARD office currently in Larne to the (i) Mullusk area; or (ii) Templepatrick area, if so, to outline (a) the cost involved in relocating to existing accommodation; and (b) the cost involved in land purchase and construction of a new building. (AQW 8003/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am seeking to identify the best option to deliver farm business services to customers in the South and East Antrim area. To further this, my Department has undertaken an analysis of a number of options for a location of a DARD Direct office. The locations considered are Larne, Ballyclare, Mullusk, Templepatrick, Antrim, Dundrod and Lisburn. A financial analysis is currently being completed, so I am unable to provide you with costs at this stage.

Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail who sits on the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority and were the appointments carried out in line with public appointments procedures and equality legislation. (AQW 8041/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The membership of the NI Fishery Harbour Authority Board is:

- Margaret Andrews, Chairperson
- Morris Walters
- Peter Ronaldson
- Gordon Irwin OBE
- Terry Jarvis
- Harold Henning
- Roy Teggarty

All of the above appointments were carried out in line with guidance issued by the Office of Commissioner for Public Appointments NI and complied with equality legislation.

European Fisheries Fund

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when will each European Fisheries Fund measure be opened for applications. (AQW 8042/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Subject to DFP approval of the business cases currently being assessed by economists, the first four European Fisheries Fund Measures will open for applications on 30th June. These key measures are Collective Actions; Fishing Ports, Landing Sites and Shelters; Investments in Processing and Marketing; and, Productive Investments in Aquaculture.

Priority Axis 1 Measures, that focus on the adaptation of fishing fleets will open this November, when the Fisheries Forum, which met yesterday, has reported its recommendations to me and the proposals have been subject to commensurate appraisal.

Priority Axis 4, focusing on the Sustainable Development of Fisheries Areas, will open in April 2010 after the South Down Fishing Taskforce Action Plan has been evaluated. This independent evaluation will be used to shape the Axis 4 Programme for our fishing dependent communities.

Other than Priority Axis 4, it is anticipated that all other Measures, within Priority Axis 2 and 3, such as protection and development of aquatic fauna and flora; development of new markets and promotional campaigns; and, pilot projects, will be opened before the end of the current calendar year.

Fisheries Forum

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when the Fisheries Forum will report. (AQW 8043/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Fisheries Forum discussed its report in plenary session at its meeting on 3rd June. I expect that the Forum will send it to me shortly for consideration.

Supply of Ice

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the economic problems facing the fishing fleet and industry, for her assessment of the privatisation of the supply of ice. (AQW 8044/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Ice supply, particularly in the summer and for small vessels, is essential for product quality and in the current economic climate it is important that the local fishing fleet continues to provide top quality product in a difficult and competitive market place.

The NI Fisheries Harbour Authority has concluded that the business of producing and selling ice to the private sector only is a commercial activity that does not sit comfortably with NIFHA's role as a public sector body. The work done to date by NIFHA suggests that the ice requirements of the industry could be provided more flexibly and cost-effectively by the private sector. I would urge the industry to engage positively with the Harbour Authority and my Department (in relation to grants that may be available) to put in place the alternative sources of supply that will be needed whenever NIFHA facilities cease production.

Divisional Veterinary Office Premises in Larne

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her estimate of the costs involved in any closure of the Divisional Veterinary Office premises in Larne; and if her Department will continue to incur costs if there is a closure. (AQW 8052/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As you are likely to be aware, I have decided that the successful DARD Direct one stop shop approach will be rolled out to 12 locations across the north of Ireland. I have confirmed 11 of these locations (Omagh, Dungannon, Armagh, Newry, Downpatrick, Newtownards, Ballymena, Coleraine, Claudy, Magherafelt and Enniskillen) but, I have yet to decide on the location of the final office which will provide services in South and East Antrim. Stakeholders have provided views on a location Option analysis for South and East Antrim but cost estimates have not been finalised. I am currently unable to provide you with estimates until this work has been completed.

Kilmourne Dredger

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority's dredger "Kilmourne", (i) what she is doing to address the current difficulties with the dredger; (ii) for her assessment of the NIFHA's maintenance of "Kilmourne"; (iii) what the timetable for the return of the dredger to operations is; and (iv) how much is being paid by NIFHA to charter a dredger from Dundalk. (AQW 8086/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Dredging of navigational channels is an operational matter for the NI Fishery Harbour Authority. I understand that as part of the business case for an extensive upgrade of the MD Kilmourne a strategic review of the Authority's in-house dredging operation was carried out during 2008-09. This review concluded that the Authority should carry out a trial for a one or two year period using an external dredging contractor. An external contractor may be able to provide a more effective and better 'value for money' service to the Authority compared to operating its own in-house dredger. The Authority put out a public tender in April 2009. The appointment of a dredging contractor is expected to be made during June 2009. The Authority has retained the MD Kilmourne pending the outcome of the trial.

A Dundalk dredger was used in the latter half of 2008-09 to carry out essential dredging of the Kilkeel Harbour entrance pending the launch of the tender exercise. The cost of the operation cannot be released as it may prejudice commercial interests.

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Credit Cards

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) how many credit cards have been issued to his Department's staff for work purposes; and (ii) in relation to punitive bank charges on these cards, (a) how many has there been; (b) the total cost of the charges; and (c) the reasons for the charges, in each of the last five years. (AQW 7906/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): My Department does not issue credit cards to its staff. Instead, it uses the Government Procurement Card (GPC) which is sponsored by the Office of Government Commerce and HM Treasury.

There is no cost to the Department for using GPC.

Regional and Minority Languages

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure the current position on his input into the UK's 3rd Periodical Report on Regional and Minority Languages and to outline the position on the reports of the other devolved regions. (AQW 7951/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The European Charter is an international convention designed to protect and promote regional and minority languages as a threatened aspect of Europe's cultural heritage. The Charter does not establish any individual or collective rights for the speakers of regional or minority languages.

The Northern Ireland input to the UK's Third Periodical Report is a factual record of relevant actions implemented between July 2005 and July 2008 in relation to Ulster Scots and Irish. Issues that were not taken forward and events that occurred outside the timeframe are beyond the scope of this report.

The Northern Ireland input is still being considered by the deputy First Minister. I raised this issue at the Executive Meeting on Thursday 23 April but agreement has still not been achieved. At this stage I am unable to specify when the report might be finalised.

The UK Report issued to the Council of Europe, without the Northern Ireland input, on Tuesday 26 May 2009. All other devolved administrations provided input to the report.

Cleaning Products

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans his Department has to purchase cleaning, household or toiletry products which, including their contents, have not been tested on animals. (AQW 7965/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Within DCAL the cleaning in all areas of the Department is carried out by a contractor appointed by Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) in the Department of Finance & Personnel, through competitive tender.

DCAL has no input into the cleaning, household or toiletry products used by the contractor as these are supplied as an inclusive cost within the contract.

Cleaning contractors appointed by CPD are contracted to use cleaning products that are fit for the purpose intended, and environmentally friendly.

The contract does not refer to animal testing.

Ulster-Scots Agency

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to ensure that east-west funding could be made available through the Ulster-Scots Agency. (AQW 8076/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Ulster-Scots Agency has protocols in place which allow the Agency to consider funding for east-west projects providing the criteria are met.

The agency has revised its financial assistance scheme to include the possible provision of travel arrangements to outside the island of Ireland but implementation is subject to the necessary approvals.

Windsor Park Football Stadium

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) when all elements of the Sports Grounds Order 2006 will be implemented fully; and (ii) to give his assessment of the impact this legislation will have on crowd capacity at Windsor Park football stadium. (AQW 8087/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Subject to the normal statutory processes, including the approval, by the Northern Ireland Assembly, of relevant subordinate legislation, all the elements of The Safety of Sports Grounds (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 will be commenced fully in the 2009 calendar year.

The impact The Safety of Sports Grounds (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 will have on crowd capacity at any sports ground, including Windsor Park, will, under the legislation, be a matter for the relevant district council to assess and determine. The safety certificate the relevant council issues will set the approved safe capacity limit for the venue.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Irish-Medium Schools

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Education (i) how many Irish-medium schools in the last 10 years have been unable to claim interest expenses after the sites of the schools were transferred into the school trustees' names so that the school site could be vested by the Department; and (ii) what were the costs incurred by the school trustees. (AQW 7021/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Tá ceithre Ghaelscoil a léirigh inmharthanacht agus a bhí dílsithe don eastát scoile le deich mbliana anuas. Aisíoctar iontaobhaí ar dhílsiú an tsuímh do chuidiú deontas caipitil nuair a fhaigheann mo Roinn na sonraise admháilte d'oibreacha chaipitil chomhaontaithe a rinneadh.

There are four Irish-medium schools which have demonstrated viability and been vested in the schools' estate in the last 10 years. Trustees are reimbursed on vesting of the site for capital grant aid after receipted invoices are received in my department for agreed capital works carried out. The payment of interest charges is not included. Interest costs incurred by trustees are not known to my department.

The most recent Chief Inspector's report for the school's estate highlights the need to address the issue of poor accommodation in the Irish-medium sector and my officials are working to resolve this situation.

Crumlin Integrated College

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education if a grant has been allocated for building work for Crumlin Integrated College; and if so, how much the grant was and what was its purpose. (AQW 7041/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt freagrach ar an scoil seo. Tá tugtha le fios ag an Bord nach bhfuil a fhios acu faoi leithdháileadh deontais chuig an coláiste fá choinne obair tógála ach gur cuireadh tús le scéim a sholáthróidh seomraí Eacnamaíocht Baile, páirceáil agus oibreacha chóiríochta eile ag beidh costas £446,558 ag baint leis an scéim seo.

This school is the responsibility of the North Eastern Education and Library Board. The Board has advised that it is not aware of the allocation of a grant to the college for building work but that it has commenced a scheme costing £446,588 to provide a Home Economics suite, car parking and other accommodation works.

Voluntary Grammar Schools

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 6453/09, (i) if the Financial Audit Arrangements Manual for Voluntary Grammar Schools includes a requirement for public and other funds to be kept in separate bank accounts; and (ii) if her Department is informed or copied the audit for funds raised by Voluntary Grammar Schools such as 'voluntary fees' applied to pupils. (AQW 7246/09)

The Minister of Education: The Financial Audit Arrangements Manual for Voluntary Grammar Schools does not include a requirement for public funds and other funds to be kept in separate bank accounts, however, the manual requires that arrangements for financial control within voluntary grammar schools should be consistent with the principles of good practice. These arrangements are subject to both internal and external audits by professionally qualified auditors with the results of these audits submitted for analysis and evaluation by the Department.

I dtaca leis an iniúchadh ar chistí a thiomsaíonn scoileanna gramadaí deonacha, faigheann an Roinn cóipeanna de Ráitis Cuntais iniúchta (Foirm S40) ó gach Scoil Ghramadaí Dheonach gach bliain agus áirítear iontu sonraí de chistí poiblí agus neamhphoiblí a fuair na scoileanna, mar shampla táillí saorálacha a iarrtar ó dhaltáí.

In terms of the audit for funds raised by voluntary grammar schools, the Department receives copies of all Voluntary Grammar Schools' annual audited Statement of Accounts (Form S40) which include details of public and non-public funds received by the schools such as voluntary fees applied to pupils.

This provides sufficient detail to enable all grant funding provided by the Department to be traced to the school's full annual audited accounts. This reconciliation is also sufficient to determine the overall financial status of the school. However, there are currently eight voluntary grammar schools who do not prepare annual audited accounts and I have asked these schools to have a full set of audited accounts prepared.

The Audit Office (NIAO) have acknowledged the strengthening of the accountability arrangements for voluntary grammar schools and have commented that this signifies an 'improvement to the current procedures as previously audited by them' and that it sees the work 'as a means of addressing previous reservations about accountability'.

Grammar Schools Entrance Testing

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education how many primary schools are preparing children for entrance testing for grammar schools. (AQW 7526/09)

The Minister of Education: Sonraítear i dtreoir na Roinne ar Aistriú 2010 gur chóir do bhunscoileanna a thabhairt faoi deara nach féidir a éileamh orthu go n-ullmhófaí páistí do theisteanna iontrála agus sonraítear go soiléir sa treoir go molann an Roinn go láidir nach ndéantar é.

The Department's transfer 2010 guidance states that primary schools should note that preparation of children for entrance tests cannot be required of them and makes clear that the Department strongly recommends against it.

Primary schools must abide by their statutory duty to deliver the revised curriculum, something which is monitored through the work of the Education and Training Inspectorate. Parents also have a right to question the decision of any primary school to deviate from the revised curriculum through teaching to a test. Where the Board of Governors of a primary school is found to have failed to discharge its statutory duty to deliver the curriculum, it can be required to do so, ultimately, if necessary, by a direction from the Department.

I have written to all primary schools reminding them of their statutory duties.

I note also that the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) has written to the Chairpersons of Board of Governors and Principals of all Catholic Maintained Primary Schools with advice on transfer 2010. That advice asks schools to note "that in the event that they have wilfully disregarded and acted outwith advice [from DE or CCMS] it may be difficult to support the indemnification of their actions."

Child Poverty

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Education what her Department is doing to raise awareness among teachers of the impact of poverty on children's school experience. (AQW 7643/09)

The Minister of Education: Bíonn formhór na múinteoirí ag gach céim den oideachas feasach ar thionchar na bochtaineachta ar pháistí, tríd na heispéiris a bhíonn acu ó lá go lá. Féachann scoileanna go ginearálta, tríd an teagasc agus tríd na córais tacaíochta agus tréadchúraim a bhíonn acu, féachann siad le dul i ngleic leis na baic a bhíonn ar chuid mhór páistí óga, lena n-áirítear iad siúd ó theaghlaigh atá ag maireachtáil faoi bhochtaineacht.

Through their daily experience, most teachers in all phases of education are aware of the impact of poverty on children. Schools generally, through their teaching and their support and pastoral care systems, attempt to deal with the barriers that many young children face, including those where families experience poverty. The Targeting Social Need (TSN) factor within the Common Funding Formula provides additional funding to assist schools in addressing the problems arising from social deprivation and educational underachievement, in line with the principles of directing resources at those most disadvantaged in our society.

I believe, however, that the structures of our system are fundamentally inequitable. In my period as Minister, I have raised the issues around barriers to learning, including those related to socio-economic circumstances, continually through my policies, my presentations to teachers and my visits to schools and teachers. These issues are at the heart of all my work on SEN and Inclusion, newcomer pupils, school standards and the curriculum.

I will continue to press the case for greater equality throughout the education system. I will ensure that TSN issues are central to my review of school funding. On transfer 2010, I will seek to ensure that fair and equitable admission arrangements are in place that give all children from whatever background, opportunities for access to good quality education.

St Bernard's Primary School, East Belfast

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Education for an update on the provision of a new school building for St Bernard's Primary School, Wynchurch, East Belfast. (AQW 7742/09)

The Minister of Education: Is ceist í pleanáil eastát na scoileanna faoi chothabháil a bhaineann le Comhairle na Scoileanna Caitleachacha faoi Chothabháil (CCMS) ar an 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 Bernard'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.

Middletown Centre for Autism

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) how many people have had professional training relating to Autism Spectrum Disorder provided by the Middletown Centre; (ii) the place and dates on which these training courses took place; (iii) the duration in hours of each course; (iv) how many people attended each course; and (v) the specific subject title of each course. (AQW 7883/09)

The Minister of Education: Bhí seacht gcéad agus seasca duine san iomlán a d'fhreastail ar chúrsaí um neamhord speictrim uathaigh a soláthraíodh trí Ionad Uathachais Choillidh Chanannáin. Sonraítear an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

There have been a total of seven hundred and sixty attendees at training courses relating to autism spectrum disorder provided by the Middletown Centre for Autism. The breakdown of the information requested is detailed on the table over.

MIDDLETOWN CENTRE FOR AUTISM: INFORMATION REGARDING TRAINING PROVIDED TO PROFESSIONALS**DECEMBER 2007- MAY 2009**

| Course Date | Course Title | Course Location | Duration of Course (Hours) | Numbers Who Attended Course |
|----------------------|--|------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 12 -16 November 2007 | 5 Day TEACCH | Omagh | 40 Hours | 25 |
| 10th December 2007 | Psycho-Educational Profile (3rd edition) (PEP-3) | Middletown | 6 hours | 12 |
| 14th December 2007 | Asperger's Syndrome and Mental Health Issues | Middletown | 6 hours | 9 |
| 29th July 2008 | PEP-3 | Strabane | 6 hours | 22 |
| 16 September 2008 | PEP-3 | Strabane | 6 hours | 11 |
| 26 September 2008 | Asperger's Syndrome and Mental Health Issues | Middletown | 6 hours | 35 |
| 7 November 2008 | Sensory, Motor & Relationship Perspectives in Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) | Athlone | 6 hours | 28 |
| 8 November 2008 | Sensory Processing Disorder and ASD | Stranmillis | 6 hours | 20 |
| 10-11 November 2008 | TEACCH-Transition Assessment Profile | Middletown | 14 hours | 32 |
| 13-14 November 2008 | TEACCH-Transition Assessment Profile | Athlone | 14 hours | 21 |
| 5 December 2008 | Meeting the sensori-motor needs of children with ASD within the curriculum framework | Middletown | 6 hours | 34 |
| 12 December 2008 | Asperger's Syndrome and Mental Health Issues | Bangor | 6 hours | 21 |
| 7 January 2009 | Meeting the sensori-motor needs of children with ASD within the curriculum framework | Belfast | 6 hours | 34 |
| 8 January 2009 | PEP-3 | Donegal | 6 hours | 10 |
| 15 January 2009 | PEP-3 | Middletown | 6 hours | 7 |
| 16 January 2009 | Sensory, Motor & Relationship Perspectives in ASD | Middletown | 6 hours | 7 |
| 21 January 2009 | PEP-3 | Portlaoise | 6 hours | 19 |
| 28 January 2009 | PEP-3 | Dublin | 6 hours | 17 |
| 4 February 2009 | PEP-3 | Limerick | 6 hours | 16 |
| 5 February 2009 | ASD Training | Middletown | 2 hours | 8 |
| 11 February 2009 | PEP-3 | Middletown | 6 hours | 10 |
| 16 February | TEACCH | Glenveagh | 6 hours | 20 |
| 17 February | TEACCH | Glenveagh | 6 hours | 20 |
| 20 February 2009 | Sensory, Motor & Relationship Perspectives in ASD | Middletown | 6 hours | 20 |
| 25 February 2009 | ASD and Co-morbidities | Dublin | 6 hours | 17 |
| 26 February 2009 | TEACCH Practice and Research | Middletown | 6 hours | 15 |
| 4 March 2009 | ASD and Co-morbidities | Limerick | 6 hours | 6 |
| 6 March 2009 | ASD and Co-morbidities | Belfast | 6 hours | 32 |
| 11 March 2009 | ASD and Co-morbidities | Middletown | 6 hours | 10 |
| 13 March 2009 | Sensory, Motor & Relationship Perspectives in ASD | Dublin | 6 hours | 29 |
| 20 March 2009 | ASD and Co-morbidities | Portlaoise | 6 hours | 12 |
| 23rd-27th March | 5-day TEACCH training course | Banbridge | 40 hours | 25 |
| 24 April 2009 | Sensory, Motor & Relationship Perspectives | Limerick | 6 hours | 29 |
| 30 April 2009 | Asperger's Syndrome and Mental Health Issues | Middletown | 6 hours | 18 |

| Course Date | Course Title | Course Location | Duration of Course (Hours) | Numbers Who Attended Course |
|-------------|--|-----------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 6 May 2009 | Social & Life Skills Training for Primary School Pupils with ASD | Middletown | 6 hours | 32 |
| 12 May 2009 | Applied Behaviour Analysis in the Classroom | Middletown | 6 hours | 22 |
| 13 May 2009 | Sensory, Motor & Relationship Perspectives in ASD | Strabane | 6 hours | 22 |
| 14 May 2009 | Sensory, Motor & Relationship Perspectives in ASD | Belfast | 3 hours | 33 |

Epilepsy

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) what specific training is given to teachers on dealing with epilepsy; (ii) if this training is provided on an ongoing basis; (iii) if there is any co-operation with agencies or charities in providing this training and; (iv) how many children within the education system have been diagnosed with epilepsy, broken down by council area. (AQW 7908/09)

The Minister of Education: I dtéarmaí leathan, soláthraítear múinteoirí atá cáilithe go ginéarála tríd an oideachas múinteoirí tosaigh (ITE). Laistigh de gach cúrsa ITE, áfach, faigheann micléinn an oideachais oiliúint ar an Chód Cleachtais um Riachtanais Speisialta Oideachais agus caithfidh siad a léiriú go bhfuil siad tuisceanach air seo. Clúdaítear aithint ar riachtanais speisialta na ndaltaí agus diriú ar straitéisí a ndéanfaidh freastal ar na riachtanais sin, mar phríomh-oiliúint ar riachtanais speisialta oideachais sna cúrsaí ITE. Bíonn rogha ar leith a bhaineann le riachtanais speisialta oideachais (SEN) glactha ag roinnt micléinn an oideachais i rith a gcláir oiliúna agus caitheann roinnt acu cuid dá gcleachtadh teagaisc i scoileanna speisialta.

In broad terms, initial teacher education (ITE) produces generally qualified teachers. However, within all ITE courses, student teachers are educated in and expected to demonstrate understanding of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice. Training in special educational needs in ITE courses mainly covers the recognition of pupils' special needs and focuses on strategies to meet those needs. Some student teachers choose a special educational needs (SEN) specific option during their training programme and some spend part of their teaching practice in special schools.

During the induction and early professional development stages of a beginning teacher's career, teachers are further educated in and expected to demonstrate their competence in the recognition of pupils' special educational needs. With regard to continuing professional development, those wishing to focus on areas such as special education should have in-service training made available to them through the Education and Library Boards.

In this connection the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) have advised that while there is no specific training offered to teachers dealing with epilepsy, schools can request training from the ELBs when a particular special need, including epilepsy, is identified for specific pupils. When a request for training is made the ELB would secure this from the most appropriate provider which in the case of epilepsy would most likely be the local Health and Social Care Trust. This ensures that the training delivered is appropriate to the needs of the individual child.

Furthermore, following the issue of the Department of Education's document "Supporting Pupils with Medication Needs" in 2008, a training programme for school principals was offered to all schools to ensure that all pupils with medical needs, including epilepsy, could have their needs met in schools.

The diagnosis of children with epilepsy is the responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety. However the number of children recorded as having SEN as a result of epilepsy, in the 2008 school census is as follows:-

| Primary, post-primary and special pupils who are recorded as having epilepsy 2008/09 | | | | | |
|--|---|---------|--------------|---------|-------|
| District Council Code | District Council Name | Primary | Post primary | Special | Total |
| Postcode Not Provided/ Unknown / Not Recognised | Postcode Not Provided/ Unknown / Not Recognised | 5 | 12 | 7 | 24 |

| Primary, post-primary and special pupils who are recorded as having epilepsy 2008/09 | | | | | |
|--|-----------------------|------------|--------------|------------|------------|
| District Council Code | District Council Name | Primary | Post primary | Special | Total |
| 95AA | Antrim | 8 | 5 | 15 | 28 |
| 95BB | Ards | 5 | 7 | 16 | 28 |
| 95CC | Armagh | * | # | 11 | 26 |
| 95DD | Ballymena | * | * | 14 | 19 |
| 95EE | Ballymoney | * | * | 7 | # |
| 95FF | Banbridge | * | * | 12 | 18 |
| 95GG | Belfast | 36 | 48 | 57 | 141 |
| 95HH | Carrickfergus | * | * | 13 | 19 |
| 95II | Castlereagh | 9 | 8 | 15 | 32 |
| 95JJ | Coleraine | # | * | 14 | 21 |
| 95KK | Cookstown | * | * | 17 | 22 |
| 95LL | Craigavon | 7 | 11 | 10 | 28 |
| 95MM | Derry | 10 | 22 | 26 | 58 |
| 95NN | Down | 10 | 11 | 19 | 40 |
| 95OO | Dungannon | 7 | 14 | 13 | 34 |
| 95PP | Fermanagh | 5 | 6 | 10 | 21 |
| 95QQ | Larne | * | * | # | 19 |
| 95RR | Limavady | * | * | 9 | 14 |
| 95SS | Lisburn | 10 | 16 | 43 | 69 |
| 95TT | Magherafelt | # | * | 8 | 16 |
| 95UU | Moyle | 0 | * | 0 | * |
| 95VV | Newry & Mourne | 8 | 16 | 22 | 46 |
| 95WW | Newtownabbey | 10 | 10 | 9 | 29 |
| 95XX | North Down | * | # | 15 | 22 |
| 95YY | Omagh | 6 | 6 | 17 | 29 |
| 95ZZ | Strabane | * | # | 8 | 18 |
| Total | | 173 | 241 | 422 | 836 |

Source: School census 2008/09

Note:

1. Primary includes nursery, reception and year 1 - 7 classes.

* denotes fewer than 5 pupils

denotes figure ≥ 5 suppressed due to potential identification of individual pupils

School Attendance

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to outline the current policy within the education community on taking children out of school mid term. (AQW 7950/09)

The Minister of Education: Since September 2006, a new standardised system of recording absences has been used in schools, following an update of the attendance module of the Classroom 2000 (C2k) system. This

enables schools to electronically record pupils' absences, the reasons for the absence and whether the absence is authorised or unauthorised.

Cuimsíonn Imlitir Uimh 2006/14 de chuid na Roinne ar Fhreastal Scoile: Taifeadadh Neamhláithreachta i Scoileanna, cuimsíonn sí treoir ar na cóid neamhláithreachta atá le húsáid ag scoileanna. Tá cóip den imlitir seo ar fáil ar láithreán gréasáin na Roinne ag

http://www.deni.gov.uk/revised_circular_2006_14_-_school_attendance__absence_recording_by_schools_-_6_october_2008.pdf

The Department's Circular No 2006/14 - "School Attendance: Absence Recording by Schools" includes guidance on the absence codes to be used by schools. A copy of this is available on the Department's website at

http://www.deni.gov.uk/revised_circular_2006_14_-_school_attendance__absence_recording_by_schools_-_6_october_2008.pdf

Cleaning Products

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Education what plans her Department has to purchase cleaning, household or toiletry products which, including their contents, have not been tested on animals. (AQW 7978/09)

The Minister of Education: Dheimhnigh soláthraithe na n-earraí glantacháin, tí agus maisíochta a úsáideann na Conraitheoirí Glantacháin sa Roinn nach dtástáiltear earra ar bith dá gcuid ar ainmhithe.

The suppliers of the cleaning, household and toiletry products used by the Cleaning Contractors in my Department have confirmed that none of their products are tested on animals.

New Nursery and Primary School in Magherafelt

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Education to explain the delay in building the new nursery and primary school in Magherafelt; and (i) if planning permission has been granted; (ii) if the land has been purchased; (iii) when is work due to start; and (iv) when the building is due for completion. (AQW 7982/09)

The Minister of Education: Planning permission for the new primary and nursery schools has been granted. The acquisition of the land has, however, not been completed. This is currently being worked through by the legal representatives of the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) and OFMDFM and it is anticipated that this will be completed in the near future.

The NEELB has advised that there was a delay in obtaining the planning permission for the new site as a result of the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) requesting significant additional site investigations to be carried out. A detailed method statement for dealing with possible contaminants also had to be submitted. A second delay in progressing the project has resulted from the legal challenge to the Department's Major Construction Framework and the need for the Board to introduce single stage procurement documentation to replace the Framework.

Bunaithe ar an sheasamh reatha Measann an NEELB nach gcuirfear tús leis an obair tógála go dtí Deireadh Fómhair \ Samhain 2009 agus go gcuirfear i gcrích an obair seo thart fá mhí Mheán Fómhair 2011.

Based on the current position the NEELB has estimated that it will be October/November 2009 before construction work will get underway with a completion date of around September 2011.

Temporary Contract Teachers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline the pay arrangements for temporary contract teachers who are unable to work due to short-term illness. (AQW 7999/09)

The Minister of Education: Is féidir múinteoirí sealadacha nach bhfuil ábalta bheith ag obair pá breoiteachta reachtúil a fháil má tá siad as láthair ar feadh ceithre lá nó níos mó ná sin, má sholáthraíonn siad fianaise liachta agus má tá meán-thuillimh seachtainiúil acu a bhfuil ar a laghad ag an íostearainn tuilleamh sna hocht seachtain roimh bheith as láthair.

Temporary teachers who are unable to work due to illness qualify for Statutory Sick Pay if they are absent for four or more days, provide medical evidence and have average weekly earnings of at least the lower earnings limit in the eight weeks prior to absence.

Irish-Speaking Primary Schools

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Education if there is provision for children who attend Irish-speaking primary schools to have tests carried out in Irish, instead of English, if they are suspected as being dyslexic. (AQW 8012/09)

The Minister of Education: Faoi láthair, níl soláthar ann do pháistí a fhreastalaíonn ar bhunscoileanna lán-Ghaeilge le teist mheasúnaithe don disléicse a fháil ó shíceolaí oideachais trí Ghaeilge seachas trí Bhéarla.

There is currently no provision for children who attend Irish-speaking primary schools to have an educational psychologist's assessment test for dyslexia carried out in Irish rather than English.

The review of Irish-medium education report published earlier this year does, however, make recommendations to strengthen support for children with special educational needs (SEN) in Irish-medium education. These include increasing capacity to meet needs through the medium of Irish, through the development of SEN support staff with high-quality Irish-language skills and investigating the development of high-level diagnostic tools. A feasibility study will be undertaken in the near future to consider options for developing these tools.

I have also been advised that the Principal Educational Psychologists Group, representing the Education and Library Boards, is currently in contact with their colleagues in the south in order to gain an insight into the issues and practicalities associated with the assessment of pupils' special educational needs in Irish.

Admissions Criteria

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQO/2782/09, to provide an example of how selective admissions criteria for post-primary schools could fail to identify the exact number of applicants that their admissions number, as set by her Department, permits. (AQW 8075/09)

The Minister of Education: Má ghlacann scoil le páistí bunaithe ar chritéir iontrála acadúla, rud a sháraíonn Treoir Aistrithe 2010 na Roinne, is dócha go mbeadh ar an scoil sin úsáid a bhaint as cuid nó iomlán dá critéir foilsithe iontrála eile le daltaí a roghnú go dtí an áit dheireanach atá ar fáil laistigh de líon iontrála faofa na scoile.

A school that admits pupils on the basis of an academic admissions criterion, in contravention of the Department's transfer 2010 guidance, is likely to be an oversubscribed school which will need to apply some or all of its other published admissions criteria in order to select pupils down to the last available place within the school's approved admissions number.

The application of an academic admissions criterion generally produces groups of applicants with the same test grade. To illustrate the point, and with reference to the outgoing Transfer Test arrangements, a school may have 50 places available and receive applications from 30 pupils with A grades and 30 pupils with B1 grades. Those with A grades are allocated the first 30 places. In order to identify which 20 out of the 30 with B1 grades should be admitted to the remaining places available, non-academic admissions criteria need to be applied.

Care must be taken to ensure that these non-academic admissions criteria are framed in such a way as to enable the school to distinguish between individual pupils who qualify for the final criterion that needs to be applied in order to admit precisely the number of pupils indicated by the approved admissions number.

DEPARTMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Modern Languages Strategy

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he is taking to develop a modern languages strategy at further education level. (AQW 7934/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The joint University of Ulster and Queen's University Belfast Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies is considering language learning at all levels and across a broad spectrum of educational activity. They have submitted near final recommendations which will inform the development of a Languages Strategy, including at Higher and Further Education level. I will consider the recommendations when they are finalised.

Student Complaints

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the number of official complaints made by students against institutions of higher education; (ii) the nature of these complaints; and (iii) the number of these complaints that were upheld, in each of the last five years. (AQW 7970/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Information provided by Queen's University, the University of Ulster, St. Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College shows that, in the last five years, collectively;

- (i) there were thirty-six complaints made by students against those institutions, four of which are ongoing;
- (ii) the nature of those complaints is detailed in the tables attached at Annex A; and
- (iii) four of those complaints were upheld.

ANNEX A

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

| Year | Nature of Complaint | Number of Complaints | Number Upheld |
|---------|---|----------------------|---------------|
| 2007/08 | 1. Lack of academic support 2. Failure of student support processes 3. Access to student residences | 3 | 1 |
| 2006/07 | 1. Issue regarding placement | 1 | 1 |
| 2005/06 | No complaints reached final stage | 0 | |
| 2004/05 | 1. Decision to require student to withdraw 2. Timing of examinations | 2 | 0 |
| 2003/04 | No complaints reached final stage | 0 | |

ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

| Year | Nature of Complaint | Number of Complaints | Number Upheld |
|---------|-------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| 2007/08 | No complaints | 0 | |
| 2006/07 | No complaints | 0 | |
| 2005/06 | No complaints | 0 | |
| 2004/05 | No complaints | 0 | |
| 2003/04 | 1. Unsatisfactory academic progress | 1 | 0 |

STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

| Year | Nature of Complaint | Number of Complaints | Number Upheld |
|---------|--|----------------------|---------------|
| 2008/09 | 1. Student placement error 2. Complaint regarding no evening library facilities 3. Complaint about delay in processing Student Loan Application | 3 | 0 |
| 2007/08 | No Complaints | 0 | |
| 2006/07 | 1. Review of assessment decision – unfair treatment in the marking of a module | 1 | 0 |
| 2005/06 | 1. Complaint against fourth year teaching practice grade on medical grounds 2. Complaint against awarding a fail grade in final teaching practice for PGCE and the College insisting on the undertaking of an additional school-based work assignment | 2 | 0 |
| 2004/05 | 1. Complaint against decision to make students attend an extra class (as they failed a PE module due to insufficient attendance, which they claimed they had not been timetabled) | 1 | 0 |

QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY

| Year | Nature of Complaint | Number of Complaints | Number Upheld |
|---------|--|----------------------|------------------|
| 2008/09 | 1. Degree failure/ Classification 2. Quality of teaching and learning support 3. Mitigating circumstances | 3 | 0 (2 ongoing) |
| 2007/08 | 1. Harassment 2. Harassment 3. Quality of teaching and learning support 4. Quality of teaching and learning support 5. Termination of studies 6. Termination of studies | 6 | 0 (2 ongoing) |
| 2006/07 | 1. Harassment 2. Harassment 3. Discrimination 4. Degree failure/ Classification 5. Module failure 6. Module range 7. Use of religious symbols | 7 | 1 |

| Year | Nature of Complaint | Number of Complaints | Number Upheld |
|---------|--|----------------------|---------------|
| 2005/06 | 1. Harassment 2. Discrimination 3. Admissions 4. Degree failure/ Classification | 4 | 1 |
| 2004/05 | 1. Harassment 2. Module range | 2 | 0 |

Cleaning Products

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans his Department has to purchase cleaning, household or toiletry products which, including their contents, have not been tested on animals.

(AQW 7977/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department of Finance and Personnel, Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) award the cleaning and catering contracts on behalf of the NICS Government Departments and are responsible for agreeing the terms and any requirements to be met by the service provider.

It is my understanding that in relation to cleaning products the current contract stipulates that “all products used in the provision of the service shall be fit for the purpose intended, and environmentally friendly.” There is no specific requirement to compel the contractor to purchase products that have not been tested on animals.

Graduate Courses in the Republic of Ireland

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline what provision there is for funding for students who want to take up graduate and post graduate courses in the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 7985/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: EU undergraduate students, including those from Northern Ireland, attending a Higher Education Institution in the Republic of Ireland are charged a registration fee (up to €1,500 in academic year 2009/2010) per annum. However, Northern Ireland domiciled students benefit from special student support arrangements in that the cost of their registration fee is currently met in full by my Department.

Northern Ireland domiciled undergraduate students are also eligible to apply for a maintenance loan (up to £4,745 for academic year 2009/2010) and a means-tested higher education bursary of up to £2,000 from their local Education and Library Board.

There is no postgraduate funding available from my Department for Northern Ireland domiciled students attending postgraduate courses in the Republic of Ireland.

Professional Careers Advisers

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many people at risk of redundancy, or who have already lost their jobs have been seen by professional careers advisers, in the past five months.

(AQW 7995/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: During the period 1 January to 27 May 2009 a total number of 555 adults have been interviewed by my Department’s professionally qualified Careers Advisers. Statistics on adults who are at risk of redundancy, or who have already lost their jobs cannot be separated from the figures detailed above.

Apprenticeship Courses

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures have been taken to identify new skills and apprenticeship courses, that will meet the needs of the construction industry in providing zero carbon homes by 2016.

(AQW 8034/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department works closely with the Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), whose role it is to work with employers to identify current and future skills needs, develop training solutions to meet those needs, and suggest and bring forward new apprenticeship frameworks to meet the needs of industry. The Department has funded the Northern Ireland Sector Skills Council Cross Sector Renewables Group to carry out research, review training provision, and develop courses in sustainable development and renewables technology.

The Department will fund training under any new approved apprenticeship framework which has been developed and sanctioned by the appropriate Sector Skills Council.

Belfast Metropolitan College

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many students have been enrolled at Belfast Metropolitan College campuses at (i) Dunlewey Centre; and (ii) St Thomas's Whiterock, in each of the last five years. (AQW 8060/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Belfast Metropolitan College has advised that the number of enrolments at the Dunlewey Centre and Whiterock Centre, over the last 5 years, is as follows:

| Academic Year | Whiterock | Dunlewey |
|---------------|-----------|----------|
| 2004/05 | 644 | 933 |
| 2005/06 | 720 | 1,010 |
| 2006/07 | 582 | 1,048 |
| 2007/08 | 426 | 811 |
| 2008/09 | 715 | 582 |

Belfast Metropolitan College

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many staff have been employed at Belfast Metropolitan College campuses at (i) Dunlewey Centre; and (ii) St Thomas's Whiterock, in each of the last five years. (AQW 8061/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC) has informed me that the location of College staff at any given time is determined by the College's business needs.

The table below provides a break-down of staff located in the Dunlewey Centre and the Whiterock Centre in each of the last 5 years.

| Year | Dunlewey | | Whiterock | |
|-------|----------|---------|-----------|-------------------------------|
| | Academic | Support | Academic | Support |
| 04/05 | 12 | 4 | 47 | 11 |
| 05/06 | 13 | 4 | 35 | 11 |
| 06/07 | 13 | 4 | 50 | 11 |
| 07/08 | 11 | 4 | 47 | 11 (reduced to 9 in March 08) |
| 08/09 | 11 | 4 | 46 | 9 |

Belfast Metropolitan College

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning which courses or programmes provided by Belfast Metropolitan College on campuses at (i) Dunlewey Centre; and (ii) St Thomas's Whiterock, have been transferred or await transfer to another campus, in each of the last five years. (AQW 8062/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Belfast Metropolitan College has informed me that no course has been transferred from either the Dunlewey Centre or the Whiterock Centre to an alternative campus during the last five years.

However, I understand that the courses listed at Annex A, which are currently offered at the Dunlewey Centre, will transfer to the Whiterock Centre during the 2009/10 academic year.

Annex A

- Needlecraft - patchwork, quilting & soft furnishings
- Needlecraft – Dressmaking
- Public First Aid
- GCSE English
- GCSE Maths
- Beauty - Making the Most of Yourself
- Needlecraft
- Needlecraft - Patchwork & Quilting
- Arts & Crafts
- Yoga
- Painting
- Calligraphy
- Cookery - Cooking on a Budget
- Cookery - Flavours of the World Demo
- Craft skills - Woodwork
- Flower Arranging
- Exercise - Keep Fit
- Reading for Pleasure
- Investigating your family tree
- Pilates
- Creative Writing
- Painting – Portraiture
- Family Learning - Understanding Linguistic Phonics
- Drawing and Painting
- Nail Art
- Mixed Media Drawing and Painting
- Introduction to Counselling Skills
- Local History
- GCSE Sociology
- Improving your Self Confidence
- Customer Service Skills
- Preparation for Work
- Money Saving Tips
- Intro to Holistic Therapy
- Arts & Crafts - Special Needs
- Computers - Clait 1 unit OCR
- Computers - Computers for Fun
- Computers - Introduction 1 unit
- Computers - Wordprocessing OCR
- Photoshop for Fun

- French Step 1 – CCEA
- Irish Step 1 – CCEA
- Italian Step 1 – CCEA
- Essential skills literacy
- Essential skills Numeracy

Belfast Metropolitan College

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the discussions his Department has had with Belfast Metropolitan College about the future of its campuses at (i) Dunlewey Centre; and (ii) St Thomas's Whiterock. (AQW 8063/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Following a review of its provision in the area, Belfast Metropolitan College will be closing the Dunlewey Centre in July 2009. Courses currently offered at Dunlewey will transfer to the Whiterock centre. Planning for the transfer, which is intended to strengthen the delivery of programmes, has been completed and the staff and programmes will relocate from September 2009. There have been no other discussions regarding the future of the Whiterock building.

The College has been asked to update its Estate Strategy following the sector's re-structuring in August 2007 and in light of the developments underway at Springvale and Titanic Quarter.

Post Graduate Certification in Education

Ms Purvis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why decisions on intake allocations for Post Graduate Certification in Education placements are more than four months late and when he expects these decisions to be made. (AQW 8189/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The determination of the number of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) places is a matter for the Minister of Education. I understand that the Department of Education has now reached a decision on numbers for the 2009/10 academic year, including the number of Post Graduate Certificate in Education places. These were notified to all five ITE providers on 2 June 2009.

DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

InterTrade Ireland

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in relation to the operation of InterTrade Ireland, to detail (i) cut backs in funding; (ii) changes to recruitment, including for maternity cover; and (iii) any other resource changes. (AQW 7657/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): There have been no cut backs in the funding made available to InterTradeIreland in the five years from 2004 to 2008.

Funding for Inter Trade Ireland for 2009 remains subject to consideration by Sponsor and Finance Departments. No cut backs in funding to InterTradeIreland have been agreed by the NI Executive.

Similarly, going forward, no changes to the arrangements for recruitment, including maternity cover or other resource changes within InterTradeIreland have been agreed by the NI Executive.

Invest NI

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail; (i) the cost and investment breakdown of Invest NI's overseas offices in 2007/08; and (ii) any provisional figures for same in 2008/09. (AQW 7811/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI has a network of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) offices located outside Northern Ireland which focus on promoting Northern Ireland to potential investors. The cost of these offices, number of financial assistance offers and planned investment by region are as follows:

| Region | 2007-08 | 2007-08 | 2007-08 | 2008-091 | 2008-091 | 2008-091 |
|---------------------|------------------|---------------|--------------------|------------------|---------------|--------------------|
| | FDI office cost2 | No. of offers | Planned investment | FDI office cost2 | No. of offers | Planned investment |
| | £'000 | No. | £'m | £'000 | No. | £'m |
| Continental Europe | 422 | 3 | 36 | 380 | 6 | 80 |
| Great Britain5 | 1,207 | 7 | 12 | 1,437 | 12 | 17 |
| North America | 1,991 | 14 | 120 | 2,288 | 11 | 575 |
| Republic of Ireland | 343 | 7 | 40 | 405 | 13 | 107 |
| India | 135 | 2 | 20 | 142 | - | - |
| Asia Pacific | 191 | 2 | 28 | - | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 4,289 | 35 | 256 | 4,652 | 43 | 780 |

Notes:

- Figures for 2008-09 are provisional and are subject to change.
- FDI office cost comprises staff costs, office running costs and in-market activities attributed to that office.
- Office costs do not include cross-market sectoral support. This cost is attributed to Invest NI HQ, is for the benefit of multiple overseas offices and cannot therefore be broken down by office. This totalled £914k in 2007-08 and £1,549k in 2008-09 (includes cost of USNI conference).
- Breakdown of investment: Inward investment is the culmination of a process involving the participation of many Invest NI teams, often from across different offices. As such, it is not possible to align each investment with a particular office. The above table details the region of origin of number of offers and planned investment during 2007-08 and 2008-09.
- Great Britain includes Isle of Man.

Departmental Spend on Consultants

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much his Department has spent on internal and external consultants, in each of the last three years. (AQW 7839/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department's expenditure on internal and external consultants in each of the last three years is set out below. The 2006/07 and 2007/08 figures are based on accounting information that has been subject to audit. The 2008/09 accounting information has not been subject to audit.

EXPENDITURE ON INTERNAL CONSULTANTS

| 2006-07 | 2007-08 | 2008-09 |
|----------|----------|----------|
| £225,000 | £187,000 | £135,000 |

EXPENDITURE ON EXTERNAL CONSULTANTS

| 2006-07 | 2007-08 | 2008-09 |
|------------|------------|------------|
| £3,232,000 | £2,867,000 | £3,115,000 |

Businesses in Fermanagh/South Tyrone

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the support being offered by banks to businesses in Fermanagh/South Tyrone, since the economic downturn. (AQW 7871/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Through discussions with Invest NI, and directly with companies, I am aware that an increasing number of businesses are experiencing difficulties in securing affordable credit, given the current economic climate. This is a problem across all parts of Northern Ireland.

Along with the First Minister, deputy First Minister and the Minister from the Department of Finance and Personnel, I have been meeting with representatives of local banks, to discuss the impact of the downturn and how the banks are responding to the credit crunch in Northern Ireland. We have received positive messages from the banks that credit is available for businesses throughout Northern Ireland.

Additionally, I have invited senior representatives of the main banks in Northern Ireland to meet with me to discuss how greater use can be made of the Enterprise Finance Guarantee Scheme which is one of a number of current UK measures designed to address the cash flow, credit and investment needs of SMEs.

I will continue to work with my Ministerial colleagues to encourage the banks in Northern Ireland to continue to lend to viable businesses.

Unemployment Benefit

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of people claiming unemployment benefit, together with the associated unemployment rate for Craigavon Borough and Banbridge District Council areas, for the month of April, in each of the last five years. (AQW 7886/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The numbers of people claiming unemployment benefit, together with the associated unemployment rates for Craigavon and Banbridge District Council areas, for the month of April in each of the last five years are given in the following table:

| | Craigavon | | Banbridge | | Northern Ireland | |
|------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| | Number | Rate [#] | Number | Rate [#] | Number | Rate [#] |
| April 2005 | 1,006 | 1.9 | 380 | 1.4 | 28,609 | 2.7 |
| April 2006 | 1,076 | 2.0 | 361 | 1.3 | 28,204 | 2.6 |
| April 2007 | 1,003 | 1.8 | 305 | 1.0 | 25,183 | 2.3 |
| April 2008 | 1,142 | 2.1 | 346 | 1.2 | 24,768 | 2.3 |
| April 2009 | 2,394 | 4.3 | 848 | 2.9 | 46,857 | 4.3 |

[#] Percentage of the working age population

For information, corresponding data for Northern Ireland are also given in the above table.

Credit Cards

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) how many credit cards have been issued to his Department's staff for work purposes; and (ii) in relation to punitive bank charges on these cards, (a) how many have there been; (b) the total cost of the charges; and (c) the reasons for the charges, in each of the last five years. (AQW 7904/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: No credit cards have been issued to Departmental staff for work purposes in the last five years.

US/NI Investment Conference

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the inward investment secured from the US/NI Investment Conference in May 2008. (AQO 2843/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In addition to securing first time visits to Northern Ireland, the conference provided the opportunity to advance or accelerate a number of projects that were already

in the pipeline prior to the event. There is clear evidence of this as supported by the following investment projects announced during the USNI Conference period:

- NYSE Euronext (75 new jobs)
- CyberSource (56 new jobs)
- Independent News and Media (53 new jobs)
- Bombardier (safeguarding over 1,000 jobs)

To date, Invest NI has received over 40 expressions of interest in discussing what Northern Ireland can offer. A series of follow up programmes in the US and GB has taken place. No further investment projects have been announced as yet as a direct result of the conference and Invest NI continues to pursue all potential opportunities.

Invest NI is conscious of the impact of global economic conditions. The growing uncertainty and the economic downturn since the conference means many companies are increasingly focusing on cost containment and as a result are deferring investment decisions. Furthermore the pipeline of new Foreign Direct Investment prospects is not as strong as at this period last year.

Nortel Redundancies

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her Department's assessment of the redundancies announced by Nortel. (AQW 7923/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: On 14 January 2009 Nortel Networks Corporation successfully petitioned the courts in the United States, and Canada, for protection from its creditors under Chapter 11 of the US Bankruptcy Code. In conjunction with Nortel operations across 15 other European countries Nortel Networks UK Limited petitioned the UK High Court, Chancery Division, to enter a UK Administration process under the Insolvency Act 1986.

Nortel's actions in this respect were a coordinated global action to facilitate a global restructuring of the business and whilst regrettable, were understandable given the prevailing challenging international economic climate, reduced infrastructure spending by international customers and general tough trading conditions.

While the company today remains in Administration, it continues to trade, and is not in liquidation. Company management have stated that the company has sufficient cash on hand to fund ongoing operations.

As part of the global restructuring process, Nortel's Executive management team and its Administrators determined that a world-wide workforce reduction was necessary to realign the company's cost-base. In conjunction with an earlier announcement during late November 2008 announcing some 1,800 job losses globally, a further 3,200 job losses world-wide were announced during late February 2009. Specific job losses were not at that time attributed to specific Nortel sites. However it was communicated to staff that all operations around the world would be effected, that Nortel was a complex global business, facing a global slowdown in demand for its products, and was undergoing a major global restructuring process. The job losses were therefore widely anticipated by employees.

On 30 March 2009 Nortel announced that its UK operations would suffer a total of 228 job losses with 87 attributed to the Monkstown campus, and whilst highly regrettable, were unavoidable. The job losses actioned by Nortel's UK Administrators were affected under the provisions of the UK Insolvency Act 1986. The Administrators, as court appointed officials, were also required to give consideration to UK employment legislation.

Today Nortel Networks UK Limited continues to provide high quality, hi-tech jobs for over 380 employees at the Monkstown site in addition to supporting a further 80 jobs through its supply chain needs. The company has and continues, to make a valuable contribution to the local economy. At today employment levels wages and salaries for Nortel staff at Monkstown are in excess of £10 million per annum.

Nortel's decision to down-size its global operations is based on the commercial challenges it faces and was taken as a direct response to the global slowdown in demand for telecoms products. It is in no way a reflection on the skills / capabilities of the Monkstown site or Northern Ireland's capabilities as Region. Nortel's Monkstown site continues to occupy a key position as Nortel's Europe Middle East Africa supply chain management centre; managing the flow of Nortel product orders worth over US\$2 billion annually.

Officials from Invest NI, the Department for Employment and Learning and other Government agencies have worked together to deliver a practical programme of help for those employees affected with the aim of managing their transition to new skills and job opportunities.

Nortel's restructuring planning is ongoing and includes efforts to attract buyers for certain parts of the business. Invest NI continues to work towards retaining and attracting new Foreign Direct Investment that can best utilise the valuable telecommunications and ICT skills present within the Northern Ireland workforce.

Cleaning Products

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans her Department has to purchase cleaning, household or toiletry products which, including their contents, have not been tested on animals. (AQW 7984/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment cleaning services and all of its cleaning, household and toiletry products are provided within the terms of the Department of Finance and Personnel, Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) contract for cleaning services within the NICS.

The NICS contract requires of the contractors who provide these services that 'All products used in the provision of the service shall be fit for the purpose intended, and environmentally friendly.' The contract does not require that these products have not been tested on animals.

Renewable Energy Grant

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the organisation Linergy and B9 Energy received any money from her Department in terms of the Renewable Energy grant. (AQW 8025/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: While an offer has been made to Granville Eco-Park Ltd, a subsidiary of B9 Organic Energy, no funding has been distributed as yet but the promoters remain confident that the project will proceed.

While an offer has been made to Linergy Power Ltd, the company has not yet accepted this offer. Invest NI continue to work with the company to resolve outstanding issues and it is expected that the project will proceed in due course.

Pilot Broadband Fibre Trial

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she will take to ensure the continuation of the pilot broadband fibre trial, which supports businesses in Mid-Tyrone, including Greencastle, beyond 30 June 2009. (AQW 8035/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In January 2007 BT began fibre trials in 6 exchange areas. These trials were outside the remit of the Broadband Local Access Contract awarded to BT in 2004 and no DETI funding was made available.

I am advised that the trials were scheduled to run for a period of 6 months, but have, in fact, been in operation for almost 2½ years. BT has advised my Department that at no time did it give a commitment to operate a commercial service on conclusion of the trials and that it is now discontinuing them for commercial reasons.

That is entirely a matter for BT and my Department has no remit to influence commercial decisions in what is a privatised market.

Under the Broadband Fund DETI is supporting the deployment of an extensive fixed wireless network across the rural west which will deliver a range of residential and business broadband packages of up to 100Mbps, with services expected in July 2009.

My Department also has in place a contract with Avanti Communications, with access to broadband services delivered by satellite and offering products of up to 3Mbps.

For users in the Greencastle area, these may offer suitable alternative options for those affected by the discontinuation of the fibre trials.

Invest NI

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much Invest NI has given to (i) foreign companies; and (ii) local indigenous businesses, in each of the last five years. (AQW 8069/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Table 1 shows the amount of assistance Invest NI has offered to both indigenous and foreign companies between 1st April 2004 and 31st March 2009. This represents the value of support which is expected to be paid towards business-related investment during the life-time of assisted projects. The amount of investment that these projects plan to stimulate is also included.

Table 1: Invest NI Assistance Offered and Associated Planned Investment by Ownership (2004/05 to 2008/09)

| Financial Year | Externally-Owned | | | | Locally-Owned | | | | Total | |
|----------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| | Assistance Offered (£m) | % of Total in Year | Total Planned Investment (£m) | % of Total in Year | Assistance Offered (£m) | % of Total in Year | Total Planned Investment (£m) | % of Total in Year | Assistance Offered (£m) | Total Planned Investment (£m) |
| 2004/05 | 63.8 | 48% | 268.1 | 54% | 69.9 | 52% | 228.9 | 46% | 133.7 | 497.0 |
| 2005/06 | 84.8 | 63% | 432.5 | 70% | 48.9 | 37% | 183.9 | 30% | 133.7 | 616.4 |
| 2006/07 | 48.7 | 50% | 233.6 | 51% | 48.2 | 50% | 220.3 | 49% | 96.9 | 453.9 |
| 2007/08 | 54.6 | 47% | 320.3 | 46% | 60.6 | 53% | 369.1 | 54% | 115.2 | 689.4 |
| 2008/09 | 68.5 | 46% | 827.2 | 70% | 81.5 | 54% | 351.0 | 30% | 150.1 | 1,178.2 |
| Total | 320.4 | 51% | 2,081.7 | 61% | 309.2 | 49% | 1,353.1 | 39% | 629.7 | 3,434.8 |

Notes:

1. 2008/09 figures include the Bombardier C Series project - £21m assistance, £520m planned investment.
2. Total Planned Investment includes Assistance Offered.
3. 2008/09 figures are provisional and may be subject to change.
4. External figures include GB-owned projects.

Locally-owned businesses accounted for around half (49%) of the total assistance offered by Invest NI during the period (this figure rises to 54% since the inception of Invest NI). The vast majority (91%) of Invest NI interventions were on behalf of indigenous businesses.

In addition to the assistance offered directly by Invest NI to local businesses, 15,844 offers totalling over £7m were made indirectly through the Start A Business programme to individuals intending to set up a business. This programme is delivered in partnership with Enterprise Northern Ireland and provides guidance to new businesses, reliant on the local Northern Ireland market.

Project Kelvin

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide an update on Project Kelvin. (AQW 8071/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Work on Project Kelvin is progressing well and construction of the new International telecommunications link should be completed, as originally scheduled, before the end of this year.

The construction phase of the project includes both terrestrial and submarine elements. The design of the terrestrial elements is ongoing and is due to be completed by the end of the year. The submarine element is progressing very well and the cable laying ship is expected, weather permitting, to complete the installation of the new submarine cable before the end of June.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Death Threats to Belfast City Council Staff

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 7392/09, to outline what remit his Department has in relation to its responsibility for local government. (AQW 7956/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Wilson): My Department's remit is defined in statute, most notably in the Local Government Act (NI) 1972. It has a general oversight role and is responsible for policy and legislation in relation to local government administration, financing and audit. In addition, the Department has responsibility for a miscellany of local government functions such as burial grounds and crematoria, entertainment licences, emergency planning etc. and is also taking forward the reform of local government.

Death Threats to Belfast City Council Staff

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 7392/09, to outline why his Department feels it needs a 'power' to issue guidance to councils on dealing with threats to staff, given that any guidance would not be binding in law, but that a uniformity of approach would ensure that threats to staff are dealt with in all local council areas. (AQW 7957/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has no direct responsibility for staffing matters in local government. This is a matter for individual councils and the Local Government Staff Commission. The issuing of guidance by the Department relating to what is a staffing matter does not, therefore, arise.

Death Threats to Belfast City Council Staff

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 7393/09, to outline why he maintains that threats, in particular death threats, are human resources matters, given that when the Chief Executive of Craigavon Borough Council received a death threat and a Council worker had previously been the victim of sectarian murder, and the Minister's party colleague raised the issue with PSNI officers in the Westminster Parliament, rather than leaving the matter with the human resources section of the PSNI. (AQW 7958/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Local councils are employing entities in their own right. Dealing with death threats to council workers and staff is a human resources issue for each individual council to address in liaison with the PSNI.

Credit Cards

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how many credit cards have been issued to his Department's staff for work purposes; and (ii) in relation to punitive bank charges on these cards, (a) how many has there been; (b) the total cost of the charges; and (c) the reasons for the charges, in each of the last five years. (AQW 7969/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has issued six Government Procurement Cards (GPC) within the last five years to staff for work purposes. The GPC is a form of credit card. No punitive bank charges have been incurred in respect of these cards.

Planning Service

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to the supply of data to Planning On-line and the application of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 (a) is the Minister aware that (i) on the 25 March 2009, Planning Service stopped supplying Planning On-line with up-to-date data on the grounds that the data had been reclassified as 'official statistics' under the provisions of the Act; (ii) the alternative is for organisations to visit Planning Offices and request the data in hard copy, an exercise that effects the quality of

their service; and (b) what action is he proposing to resolve this matter and when will the service be restored.
(AQW 8100/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I am aware that at a meeting held on 25 March 2009, commercial customers were informed that the requirements of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and the associated Code of Practice prevented Planning Service from continuing to provide them with raw un-validated planning information from a 'live' planning database.

I will be meeting representatives of Planning On-line to discuss this issue.

Planning Service

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment (a) if he is aware (i) that Planning Service has re-classified most electronic planning data as 'official statistics' that cannot be released until the statistics for the relevant period have been published, which will result in delays for on-line access; and that data about new applications that are required for immediate on-line publication on the Planning Service website has been excluded from the general re-classification; and (b) when and by whom was the decision taken to exclude this data from the re-classification process.
(AQW 8101/09)

The Minister of the Environment:

- (a) (i) I am aware that a review of information provided on planning application forms and the codifications by Planning Service was undertaken by the N I Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). This review concluded that all information provided with a planning application falls within the definition of Official Statistics.
- (a) (ii) Information on planning applications posted on the Planning Service website has not been affected by the provision of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and the Code of Practice because the information provided on individual planning applications is considered to be principle application details which are already in the public domain and not covered by pre-release access rules.
- (b) In August 2007 my Senior Statistician reviewed all the information provided on planning application forms and codifications provided by Planning Service and confirmed that all statistics on planning disseminated from Planning Service are classified as Official Statistics.

Planning Service

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment (i) if any staff within the Planning Service have been held responsible for the significant delays and cost overruns in the management of the e-PIC project; and (ii) have any staff involved with the project been disciplined, demoted, transferred, or dismissed, in connection with the failure to meet targets for the implementation of the project.
(AQW 8102/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The e-PIC procurement process strictly followed DFP Supply rules and regulations. This included advertising the tender in the European Journal.

Planning Service

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment (i) if he is aware that the Planning Service letter to Planning On-line dated 11 May 2009 stated that the proposal by Planning On-line to continue releasing data, could not be implemented by the Planning Service because the terms of the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 prevented it from doing so; and (ii) for his assessment of the application of this Act to planning data that is already in the public domain.
(AQW 8104/09)

The Minister of the Environment:

- (i) My Planning Service officials have kept me fully informed and updated on the situation in relation to the release of data to commercial customers. I will continue to liaise with Senior Officials within Planning Service on the situation.

- (ii) The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and the associated Code of Practice sets out protocols for pre-released access to official statistics, therefore the Act has no implication for planning information that is already in the public domain.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to review the performance and structure of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. (AQO 2852/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Arlene Foster announced NIEA with its modern, risk-based approach to regulation on May 27 last year. The Agency was launched on July 1.

It is less than a year old. It has an excellent record and continues to develop and modernise the way it works. For these reasons I have no plans for a review.

Plastic Bags

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he will take to reduce the use of plastic bags. (AQO 2854/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I am already taking steps to reduce the use of all single use carrier bags handed out to shoppers and I can confirm that carrier bag numbers are coming down. I have given my support to the current voluntary agreement with leading supermarkets across the United Kingdom, represented by the British Retail Consortium, to achieve a 50% cut in numbers of carrier bags given out against 2006 levels by the end of May 2009, working towards a reduction of 70% over the longer term. The agreement should result in around 5 billion fewer bags being handed out in the UK. As I said at the time the agreement was announced it aims to significantly reduce the number of carrier bags without hitting people in the pocket.

I warmly welcome the increasing efforts by retailers to reduce numbers of bags handed out to customers. Many people who shop in our major supermarkets and also in smaller shops will have noticed that they are being asked by the shop assistant or checkout person "Do you need a bag?" Some shops have chosen to charge for their bags to encourage shoppers to reuse bags and to promote "bags for life". Some shops award bonus loyalty card points to shoppers who reuse bags. Together all of these initiatives are working to reduce the numbers of carrier bags handed out to shoppers.

I have also called on people in Northern Ireland to change their shopping habits to help to reduce the numbers of carrier bags. Simple things can be very effective and if more of us bring our own reusable carrier bags with us and refuse to take new carrier bags at the checkout we can expect to see greater reductions in carrier bag numbers in the future.

In April we also encouraged people in Northern Ireland, through local radio advertisements, to reuse their carrier bags whenever they can. These advertisements were part of the "get a bag habit" publicity campaign organised by DEFRA and the Waste & Resources Action Programme. Further information on reducing bag numbers is also available on Government websites and through the Waste & Resources Action Programme.

There are no easy answers to the carrier bags problem. However, I am satisfied that we are making good progress and that many shoppers and retailers are now playing their part to reduce the numbers of carrier bags.

Electric Cars

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment if he would consider meeting with car manufacturers to discuss the introduction of electric cars as a way of reducing the carbon footprint. (AQO 2855/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have no plans to meet with car manufacturers to discuss the introduction of electric cars as a way of reducing the carbon footprint.

The lead responsibility for the usage of electric cars does not rest with my Department but rather cuts across a number of Ministerial portfolios. I am not aware of any proposals by Executive colleagues to set targets for such usage.

In the Programme for Government PSA 22 sets a target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25% below 1990 levels by 2025. This target is the collective responsibility of all Northern Ireland Executive Ministers and it is up to us all to consider how we can best contribute to its achievement.

National Parks

Mr Storey asked the Minister of the Environment what assurance he can give that the creation of National Parks will not involve any alteration to the current arrangements for access to private lands. (AQO 2858/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I can assure the Member that regardless of any proposals for national parks, I have no intention of amending the legislation governing access to private land.

Ministerial Papers

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of the Environment to outline which of his papers are awaiting approval from the Executive. (AQO 2859/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The content of Executive papers and all aspects of Executive business is confidential and I am therefore unable to provide the information you require.

Climate Change

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions he has had with Ministers in other parts of the United Kingdom and in the Republic of Ireland on climate change. (AQO 2860/09)

The Minister of the Environment: At the recent British Irish Council meeting, held in Jersey on 17 April, I had discussions on climate change with Ministers responsible for the environment in England, Wales, Scotland, Guernsey, Isle of Man, the Republic of Ireland and Jersey.

I made a statement on the British Irish Council meeting, to the Assembly, on 5 May.

Road Safety Strategy

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment when he intends to publish the revised road safety strategy. (AQO 2861/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The new Road Safety Strategy is planned for publication in November 2010 and work is progressing in line with the project plan to allow that to happen.

My Department has been taking stock and a review of the current strategy and assessment of road safety problems in Northern Ireland have been provided to the Environment Committee and will shortly be publically available. My officials are currently engaging with road safety partners to consider possible new measures and this will continue with other interested parties over the summer. A draft strategy will be prepared by the autumn to allow formal consultation to begin early next year when I will be seeking the widest possible input from the whole community to produce a strategy we can all support.

Illegal Dumping

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment, since his Department took responsibility for prosecutions for illegal dumping, how many convictions have been secured and what level of fines have been imposed by the courts. (AQO 2863/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department of the Environment assumed responsibility for the enforcement of illegal dumping in December 2003. Since then, it has secured 360 convictions against illegal waste offenders, generating a total of £952,615 in fines.

National Parks

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment, following his visit to the Cairngorms, for his assessment of the economic opportunities which may accrue from the creation of national parks. (AQO 2864/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Under the Scottish legislation, National Parks have an economic aim as well as environmental aims. I learned about practical steps the Cairngorms National Park Authority along with the Chamber of Commerce, businesses and other partners was taking to further the economic development aim. Examples include branding of quality products and services produced in the Park, joint marketing of the area and its businesses, improving destination management, and organising training to meet identified local need.

My assessment was that the locally focused, joined-up approach brought by the Cairngorms National Park Authority was facilitating the creation of vital economic opportunities in the area.

Carbon Emissions

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the work of his Department in the development of a low carbon future. (AQO 2865/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Programme for Government commits the NI Executive collectively to reduce GHG emissions by 25% on 1990 levels by 2025.

My Department is contributing towards these targets by inputting Northern Ireland relevant aspects to policy developments relating to EU climate and energy, and UK policy development. We are currently progressing policies relating to the EU European Trading Scheme and the UK Carbon Reduction Commitment. On planning policy, Planning Policy Statement 18 on renewables has been issued for consultation and I am committed to publish it before summer recess.

Planning Applications

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of the Environment how his recent statement on the weight to be given to economic considerations on planning applications will be given operational effect. (AQO 2866/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My statement on the weight that is to be accorded to economic aspects of development proposals is a material consideration which must be taken into account in the determination of planning applications. If a development proposal has a particular economic benefit, this may be detailed and submitted in support of a planning application. However, other relevant policies are also material considerations as are the comments of consultees to the planning process and the comments of third parties, all of which must be taken into account in arriving at a final decision.

Where necessary Planning Service will consult with the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment, Invest Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Tourist Board or other Department with the relevant expertise to provide comment on information provided in support of the application.

Local Government Bill

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment when he expects to introduce Local Government Bills. (AQO 2867/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I intend to introduce the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (formerly the Local Government (Contracts and Compulsory Purchase) Bill) before the summer recess.

The Local Government (Finance) Bill will be introduced by January 2010 and the Local Government (Reorganisation) Bill will be introduced in May 2010.

Policy Planning Statement 5

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of the Environment if the Court Service has indicated when a decision is expected in the case which is preventing PPS 5 regarding Retailing, Town Centres and Commercial Leisure Developments from being implemented. (AQO 2868/09)

The Minister of the Environment: There is no indication as to when a decision will be made on this case.

Minister of the Environment

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment for the number and percentage of Wednesdays when the House of Commons was sitting, on which he carried out duties as Environment Minister, since taking up office. (AQO 2869/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Since taking up office, I have had 2 Wednesday meetings which equates to 6%. Both of these were held in London. To save costs these were doubled up with parliamentary business when I was in Westminster.

Planning Application Fees

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the reasons for the proposed increase in planning application fees. (AQO 2870/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning costs recoverable through fees are identified in line with the statutory authority in Article 127 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, as amended, and policy. Planning fees were last increased by approximately 12% in May 2005 by the Planning (Fees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005.

The costs incurred in determining planning applications and the income from fees are reviewed annually and it has been determined that the costs likely to be incurred in 2009/10 are greater than the anticipated income from fees. The number of planning applications received by the Agency fell by roughly a quarter in the 2008/09 year compared to the previous year. This has resulted in a shortfall of around £4.4 million in the Agency's planning fee income for the 2008/09 financial year and only 81.4% of relevant costs being recovered. The proposed fee increase is therefore an essential measure towards ensuring that Planning Service has adequate resources to sustain and improve further its current level of performance and service delivery.

DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Aggregates Levy

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, for each of the last five years, (i) how much has been raised through the Aggregates Levy; and (ii) how much has been returned to his Department as part of the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund, under the Barnett formula. (AQW 7743/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): The Aggregates Levy was introduced in 2002 and is a tax on the commercial exploitation in the UK of rock, sand and gravel. The aim of the Aggregates Levy is to ensure that the price of aggregates better reflects the environmental costs of quarrying. The Aggregates Levy Credit Scheme provides for 80% relief from the full rate of Aggregates Levy in respect of aggregate extracted in Northern Ireland.

Over the last five years £0.3 billion per annum has been collected nationally through the Aggregates Levy.

The funding received through the Barnett formula is unhypothecated, which means that it is available for allocation by the Northern Ireland Executive in line with local needs and priorities.

Civil Service

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in relation to the Civil Service equal pay claim, why it is necessary to begin a review of the TG1 and TG2 grades at this stage, and how many staff will be affected by this review. (AQW 7769/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The proposal to review Technical Grades is considered as a necessary and integral part of the process of establishing a firm foundation for addressing the equal pay issue. A sample of between 100 and 150 of posts in the relevant grades will be examined as part of the review.

Civil Service

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in relation to the Civil Service equal pay claim, to outline the timetable for the review of TG1 and TG2 grades to its conclusion, and when the subsequent payments will be made. (AQW 7770/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Arrangements are well underway to conduct the review of TG staff with the aim of completing the work by the end of the summer, with the cooperation of both the unions and staff. Discussions with the Trade Union are on-going in order to establish whether a negotiated settlement is possible. This will inform consideration by me, in conjunction with my colleagues in the Executive, as to how the matter should be taken forward. I am unable to provide any further specific details at present as regards when this matter will be resolved but I am keen that it is brought to a conclusion as quickly as possible.

Civil Service

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how the interest accrued on the £100 million received from Treasury last year, to facilitate a settlement in the Civil Service equal pay claim, will be dispersed. (AQW 7771/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No interest will accrue in respect of the £100 million facility I negotiated with the Prime Minister in November 2008 to address cost pressures faced by the Executive.

Civil Service

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the progress with the equal pay claim for Civil Servants and when this is likely to be completed. (AQW 7797/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I understand that NIPSA has lodged in excess of 4,500 equal pay claims with the Industrial Tribunal on behalf of female members, which are now the subject of legal processes. Departments have not yet been served with these claims but will have to respond to them in due course.

I met with representatives of the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance NIPSA on 7 May to discuss the equal pay claims. The meeting provided me with the opportunity to hear at first hand the issues of concern to NIPSA and to assure them of my commitment to resolving the Civil Service equal pay issue, if possible, through a negotiated settlement and without the need for litigation. Discussions between officials in the Department of Finance and Personnel and NIPSA are ongoing in an effort to establish as clearly as possible the parameters within which a negotiated settlement might be reached so that I, in conjunction with my Ministerial colleagues in the Executive, can consider how the matter should be taken forward.

The issues relating to equal pay in the NICS are both significant and complex and, therefore, it is important that they are properly addressed. It is likely that it may yet take some time before they will be finally resolved. However, if there are unlawful inequalities in pay in the NICS, I am determined that these should be put right.

Civil Service

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel in relation to NI Civil Service equal pay claim, (a) why his Department has not progressed the matter; and (b) to detail (i) if his Department deemed it necessary

to initiate a comprehensive grading review for staff in the TG1 and TG2 grades and his reasons for this; (ii) the total number of staff affected in this latest review; (iii) when this review will conclude; (iv) when the subsequent payments will be made to NI Civil Service employees; (v) where the interest accrued on the £100 million one year ago to settle the pay claims will go and if it will be allocated to NI Civil Service employees; and (vi) if he will resume negotiations with the Trade Union immediately. (AQW 7798/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Discussions between officials in the Department of Finance and Personnel and NIPSA are ongoing in an effort to establish as clearly as possible the parameters within which a negotiated settlement might be reached so that I, in conjunction with my Ministerial colleagues in the Executive, can consider how the matter should be taken forward.

I met with representatives of the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance NIPSA on 7 May to discuss the equal pay claims in respect of female members of the NICS. The meeting provided me with the opportunity to hear at first hand the issues of concern to NIPSA and to assure them of my commitment to resolving the Civil Service equal pay issue, if possible, through a negotiated settlement and without the need for litigation.

A review of Technical Grades across NI Departments is a necessary part of that process. Arrangements are well underway to conduct the review of TG staff with the aim of completing the work by the end of the summer, with the cooperation of the Trade Union and staff. A sample of between 100 and 150 of posts in the relevant grades will be examined as part of the review.

No interest will accrue in respect of the £100m facility I secured access to as a result of negotiations with the Prime Minister in November 2008 to address cost pressures facing the Executive.

The issues relating to equal pay in the NICS are both significant and complex and, therefore, it is important that they are properly addressed. It is likely that it may yet take some time before they will be finally resolved. However, if there are unlawful inequalities in pay in the NICS, I am determined that these should be put right.

Civil Service

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline (i) the reasons for carrying out a comprehensive grading review of the TG1 and TG2 grades; (ii) the number of staff affected by the review; and (iii) why the commitment from a year ago, to discharge equal pay claims for Civil Servants, has not yet been honoured. (AQW 7805/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Discussions with NIPSA are on-going in an effort to establish the parameters within which a negotiated settlement to the NICS equal pay issue might be reached. The review of TGI and TGII posts is a necessary part of that process and will involve the examination of a representative sample of between 100 and 150 of the posts concerned.

It has been and remains my intention to ensure a resolution to this issue as soon as possible. However, the issues are complex and it is still too early to be certain of when matters will be resolved.

Civil Service

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm (i) how long the proposed comprehensive grading review of TG1 and TG2 will take; and (ii) when will Civil Servants receive monies due in relation to their equal pay claim. (AQW 7806/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Arrangements are well underway to conduct the review of TG staff with the aim of completing the work by the end of the summer. It is still too early to say when this matter will be resolved as discussions with the Trade Union are on-going in order to establish whether a negotiated settlement is possible.

Civil Service

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in relation to the Civil Service equal pay claim, (i) the reasons for a review of the TG1 and TG2 staff grades; (ii) how many staff will be affected by the review; (iii) when the back payments will be made; and (iv) to clarify how the interest accrued on the £100 million received from Treasury to facilitate a settlement will be used. (AQW 7817/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The proposal to review Technical Grades is considered as a necessary and integral part of the process of establishing a firm foundation for addressing the equal pay issue.

A sample of between 100 and 150 of posts in the relevant grades will be examined as part of the review. Arrangements are well underway to conduct the review of TG staff with the aim of completing the work by the end of the summer, with the cooperation of both the unions and staff.

It is still too early to say when this matter will be resolved as discussions with the Trade Union are on-going in order to establish whether a negotiated settlement is possible.

No interest will accrue in respect of the £100 million facility I negotiated with the Prime Minister in November 2008 to address cost pressures faced by the Executive.

Civil Service

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel in relation to the Civil Service equal pay claim, (i) to detail the rationale for implementing a review of the TG1 and TG2 pay grades; (ii) how many staff are affected by the review; and (iii) for a time frame for the conclusion and report of this review. (AQW 7822/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The proposal to review Technical Grades is considered as a necessary and integral part of the process of establishing a firm foundation for addressing the equal pay issue.

A sample of between 100 and 150 of posts in the relevant grades will be examined as part of the review. Arrangements are well underway to conduct the review of TG staff, which is expected to take around 3 months once the analysts commence their work, with the cooperation of both the unions and staff.

Civil Service

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many staff are involved in the Civil Service equal pay claim. (AQW 7864/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: NIPSA has lodged in excess of 4,500 equal pay claims with the Industrial Tribunal on behalf of female members, which are now the subject of legal processes; Departments have not yet been served with these claims but will have to respond to them in due course.

Civil Service

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide a timetable as to when payments will be made to resolve the Civil Service equal pay claim. (AQW 7865/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: 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, 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. However, I am keen that it is brought to a conclusion as quickly as possible.

Civil Service

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline (i) the reasons for a delay of over a year in settling the Equal Pay claims; (ii) the reasons for a grading review of TG1 and TG2 grades; (iii) how many staff will be affected by the review; (iv) when it will be completed; (v) when staff will receive the money owed to them; and (vi) if the Minister can give an assurance that the interest on £100 million which was banked over a year ago will be paid to Civil Servants. (AQW 7875/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The issues relating to equal pay in the NICS are both significant and complex and, therefore, it is important that they are properly addressed. It is likely that it may yet take some time before I can confirm how it will be finally resolved.

The proposal to review Technical Grades is considered as a necessary and integral part of the process of establishing a firm foundation for addressing the equal pay issue. A sample of between 100 and 150 of posts in the relevant grades will be examined as part of the review. Arrangements are well underway to conduct the review of TG staff with the aim of completing the work by the end of the summer, with the cooperation of both the unions and staff.

It is still too early to say when this matter will be resolved as discussions with the Trade Union are on-going in order to establish whether a negotiated settlement is possible.

No interest will accrue in respect of the £100 million facility I negotiated with the Prime Minister in November 2008 to address cost pressures faced by the Executive.

Government Vehicles

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in relation to the tendering for the supply of vehicles for the government / ministerial fleet (i) how many tenders were received and from whom; (ii) what short listing criteria if any was used in the selection process and what criteria was used in making the final decision on selecting a supplier; (iii) how many vehicles were supplied and have any vehicles been supplied since this tendering process was put in place; and (iv) when the Department expects another procurement exercise will be undertaken. (AQW 7888/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There were 6 tenders received from John Mulholland Motors, Mervyn Stewart, DFC, Isaac Agnew, Honda UK and Wilson's & Co.

There was no short listing stage in the tender process and so no short listing criteria were specified. All tenders received were evaluated using the following criteria:

- Compliance with specification – 30%;
- Delivery period – 40%; and
- Whole life cost – 30%.

The supplier with the highest overall score was awarded the contract.

The outcome of the process was that 6 vehicles were supplied in May 2007 and a further 8 vehicles were supplied in June 2007. No further vehicles have been purchased since then.

Our current policy is to procure new vehicles every 3 years or sooner if required. It is expected that the next tender process will commence in early 2010.

Departmental Spend on Consultants

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much his Department has spent on internal and external consultants, in each of the last three years. (AQW 7898/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The total expenditure for the Department of Finance and Personnel over the last three years on external consultancy is set out in the table below.

| External Consultancy | | | |
|----------------------|---------|---------------|--------|
| 2006/07 | 2007/08 | 2008/09 | Total |
| £4.37m | £6.63m | £4.90m (prov) | £15.9m |

The Department has not incurred any expense for internal consultants in the last three years.

Civil Service

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when the equal pay claims of Civil Servants will be settled. (AQW 7900/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I would refer you to my answer to AQW 7231/09 issued on 16 May 2009.

Civil Service

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in relation to the Civil Service equal pay claim, (i) to outline the reasons for the review of TG1 and TG2 grades; (ii) how many staff will be subject to the review; and (iii) when it will be completed. (AQW 7901/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The proposal to review Technical Grades is considered as a necessary and integral part of the process of establishing a firm foundation for addressing the equal pay issue.

A sample of between 100 and 150 of posts in the relevant grades will be examined as part of the review. Arrangements are well underway to conduct the review of TG staff, which is expected to take around 3 months once the analysts commence their work, with the cooperation of both the unions and staff.

Ratepayers

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will ensure that ratepayers have the option of paying their rates bill by debit or credit card. (AQW 7917/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Ratepayers can currently pay their rate bills by debit card through any local shop or garage offering Payzone facilities.

Land & Property Services is currently reviewing the range of payment methods which it offers to ratepayers to pay their rate bill. In carrying out this review, LPS will be consulting with consumer groups and other appropriate organisations. The review will include consideration of the option to pay by credit card. Decisions arising from the review will be made before the issuing of 2010 rate bills.

Civil Service

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) if he has agreement with Treasury on the use of “shelf money” to settle the Civil Service equal pay claim; (ii) how much money is available to settle the claim; (iii) if he is intending to use this money for other purposes; and (iv) to outline why he is seeking a review of the TG1 and TG2 grades. (AQW 7918/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In November 2008, I negotiated with the Prime Minister a facility for access to up to £100 million current expenditure for cost pressures facing the Executive. The Executive will consider whether to access this facility in due course.

The issues relating to equal pay in the NICS are both significant and complex and, therefore, it is important that they are properly addressed. A review of Technical Grades across NI Departments is a necessary part of that process.

Social Security and Jobs and Benefits Offices

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide a breakdown, by office, of the religion of staff in all Social Security and Jobs and Benefits Offices. (AQW 7947/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) does not hold information on the religion of staff.

It does, however, collect information on the perceived community background of staff for the purpose of providing statutory reports to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and also to enable the Service to monitor the effectiveness of its equal opportunities policies. The information is not held or processed in a way that identifies the community background of individual offices.

To provide the information for individual offices would require NICS to further process the data in a way that is not compatible with the reasons for which it is collected.

Civil Service

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline if civil servants who go away on working trips are allowed to take their children with them during school term. (AQW 7952/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Civil Servants who are required to go on working trips must comply with the relevant policies of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. These policies do not contain any reference to whether children can or cannot be taken with them on such occasions.

Suicides in East Belfast

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many suicides have been recorded in the East Belfast area over the last five years. (AQW 7959/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The attached table gives the number of deaths registered due to 'suicide and self-inflicted injury'¹ and 'undetermined injury whether accidentally or purposefully inflicted'² where the deceased was resident in East Belfast Parliamentary Constituency for each year between 2004 and 2008^p.

1 International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes X60-X84, Y87.0 for years 2004-2008.

2 International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes Y10-Y34, Y87.2 for years 2004-2008.

P 2008 data is provisional

TABLE: NUMBER OF REGISTERED DEATHS DUE TO 'SUICIDE AND SELF-INFLICTED INJURY' AND 'UNDETERMINED INJURY WHETHER ACCIDENTALLY OR PURPOSEFULLY INFLICTED' IN EAST BELFAST PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY, 2004 - 2008P.

| Registration Year | Number of Suicide Deaths |
|-------------------|--------------------------|
| 2004 | 4 |
| 2005 | 9 |
| 2006 | 9 |
| 2007 | 14 |
| 2008 ^p | 10 |

Deaths from Malnutrition

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many people have died from malnutrition in hospitals in each of the last five years. (AQW 7963/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The attached table gives the number of deaths due to malnutrition¹ registered where the place of death was recorded as being in a hospital, 2004 to 2008^p.

1 Deaths are defined as being due to malnutrition using International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes E40 to E46.

P 2008 data is provisional

TABLE: THE NUMBER OF DEATHS DUE TO MALNUTRITION REGISTERED IN NORTHERN IRELAND WHERE THE PLACE OF DEATH WAS RECORDED AS BEING IN A HOSPITAL, 2004 TO 2008P

| Registration Year | Number of Deaths due to Malnutrition |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 2004 | 5 |
| 2005 | - |
| 2006 | 1 |
| 2007 | 6 |
| 2008 ^p | 2 |

Residential Properties

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the new legislation on sound insulation and ventilation in residential properties and when he expects it to be in place. (AQW 8007/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Officials have recently commenced work on revising the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 to incorporate the new and amended provisions of the Building Regulations (Amendment) Act 2009. Part of this revision will include a technical uplift to Part G (Sound insulation of dwellings) and Part K (Ventilation) of the Regulations to harmonise with standards in GB. It is anticipated that these new regulations will be introduced in 2011.

Civil Service

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the reasons for the review of TG1 and TG2 Civil Service grades. (AQW 8016/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The proposal to review Technical Grades is considered as a necessary and integral part of the process of establishing a firm foundation for addressing the equal pay issue.

Civil Service

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many staff are involved in the review of the TG1 and TG2 Civil Service grades. (AQW 8017/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: A sample of between 100 and 150 of posts in the relevant grades will be examined as part of the review.

Civil Service

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline (i) when the review of TG1 and TG2 grades will be completed; and (ii) a timescale for when backdated payments will be made. (AQW 8018/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Arrangements are well underway to conduct the review of TG staff with the aim of completing the work by the end of the summer, with the cooperation of the Trade Union and staff.

The issues relating to equal pay in the NICS are both significant and complex and, therefore, it is important that they are properly addressed. It is likely that it may yet take some time before they will be finally resolved. However, if there are unlawful inequalities in pay in the NICS, I am determined that these should be put right.

Civil Service

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to clarify for what purposes the interest gained on the £100 million pounds received from Treasury to facilitate a settlement of Civil Service back pay will be used. (AQW 8026/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No interest is due on the £100 million I secured access to as a result of negotiations with the Prime Minister in November 2008, to address a range of cost pressures facing the Executive.

Civil Service

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to clarify the total number of Civil Servants who are due to receive back pay and to detail when this will be paid. (AQW 8027/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I understand that NIPSA has lodged in excess of 4,500 equal pay claims with the Industrial Tribunals on behalf of female members, which are now the subject of legal processes. Departments have not yet been served with these claims but will have to respond to them in due course.

Officials in the Department of Finance and Personnel are currently in discussion with NIPSA in an effort to establish as clearly as possible the parameters within which a negotiated settlement might be reached so that I, in conjunction with my Ministerial colleagues in the Executive, can consider how the matter should be taken forward. It is only then that I will be in a position to confirm how many members of the NICS might be affected by any settlement. The issues relating to equal pay in the NICS are both significant and complex and, therefore, it is important that they are properly addressed. It is likely that it may yet take some time before they will be finally resolved.

Energy Performance Certificates

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many Energy Performance Certificates have been issued, and what is the level of enforcement. (AQO 2873/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: At 27 May 2009, there were 29,934 Energy Performance Certificates recorded on the official Register which, based on available figures for marketed properties, equates to approximately 75% compliance with the requirements of the Regulations.

Lone Pensioners

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, following his announcement in May 2008 of assistance for lone pensioners through rate relief and housing benefits, how he will ensure maximum uptake of the £3 million. (AQO 2875/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Since Lone Pensioner Allowance was introduced in April 2008 some 22,776 pensioners have received the 20% reduction on their rates, and current payments exceed £3 million pounds. In addition, there are currently 33,516 pensioners in receipt of full Housing Benefit and/or Rate Relief, and a further 3,823 in receipt of partial Housing Benefit and/or Rate Relief.

My Department continues to work closely with other Government Departments, voluntary organisations and other groups in the community to make sure that all who are entitled to claim reliefs and benefits are encouraged to do so. A dedicated specialist team is in place within Land & Property Services to focus on increasing the uptake of benefits and encouraging pensioners to claim their entitlements.

Civil Service: Equal Pay

Mr Maginness asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he would confirm that the financial implications of the Civil Service equal pay claim will not be used to limit the legitimate entitlement of the staff concerned. (AQO 2876/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member will appreciate that with a significant number of equal pay claims now lodged with the Industrial Tribunal, I will be limited in what I can say on this matter.

I met with NIPSA on 7th May and re-iterated my commitment to ensure that legal obligations will be met, but it would be irresponsible for me in my role as Minister of Finance not to ensure that this matter is resolved in a manner that is both fair to staff directly affected but which also minimises the consequent adverse impact on public services in general and on NICS staff in particular. The extent of the entitlement of staff is the subject of intensive discussion between my officials and the representatives of the staff concerned.

I stand by my early statements on this issue. I remain committed to reaching a negotiated outcome to the matter, if possible and I believe that is also what NIPSA want.

I consider that a negotiated outcome to this issue is of great importance because of the potential effects not just on those staff but also because of the wider implications.

Taxation: Conacre System

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what consideration he has given to the implications of the recent legal judgement on the Conacre tax issue. (AQO 2879/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am well aware of this issue and the potential adverse impact of the recent legal case for our local agricultural sector. The agricultural sector is important to our economy and I fully appreciate the relevance of this decision given that a third of our land is let out as Conacre.

As taxation is a Reserved Matter for HM Treasury to determine, I have written to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury strongly urging her to consider amending the tax treatment of land let under Conacre. I have also recently requested a further meeting with the Chief Secretary to discuss in more detail the impact of this legal ruling.

I have also met with senior representatives of the Ulster Farmers' Union to discuss this issue. I will continue to keep the UFU fully informed on my discussions with HM Treasury on this issue.

Public Sector Employment

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on proposals for the relocation of public sector jobs. (AQO 2881/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have circulated a draft Executive paper with proposals on the way forward on Professor Bain's independent review of the location of public sector jobs. In doing so I have considered carefully the views expressed by Executive colleagues and the Finance Committee as well as the points raised during the two Assembly debates on the issue. I hope that the paper will be scheduled for discussion by the Executive in the near future. Until then, it would be premature for me to comment further on the proposals.

NI Direct

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the effectiveness of NI Direct Online. (AQO 2882/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: NI Direct online is an important part of the NI direct programme which is already improving citizen's access to Government information and services.

The idea behind the website is very simple – the information that citizens need is all in one place and not spread across a large number of websites. The information is grouped within a number of recognisable themes such as Education and Learning and Health and Well Being so that the public don't need to know the workings of government to find the information they are looking for.

The website went live at the end of March in line with the PSA target. I am glad to say that already it contains a wide range of information from right across Government and also a number of transactions which research shows more and more people want to do online.

The site is already showing its value – we were able to use it for all the information on swine flu, which previously would have been spread over a number of sites.

I am satisfied that NI Direct represents the future for Government information but it is early days; we are at the beginning of a journey and there is still much to do. To ensure that the site is effective and meeting the expectations of citizens we will be carrying out consumer research and we are also developing a publicity campaign to further promote the site.

Senior Civil Service: Bonus Scheme

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on his review of the Senior Civil Service salary bonus scheme. (AQO 2883/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No local review of the Senior Civil Service bonus scheme has been commissioned. However, as I stated recently in response to another oral AQ, I have already asked my officials to examine how the recommendations of a fundamental review of the Senior Civil Service workforce and reward strategy in Whitehall, published earlier this year and known as the Normington Review, will be taken forward and to assess their applicability to Northern Ireland. My officials will be engaging with the Cabinet Office on the work required to flesh out the recommendations emerging from the review.

Monitoring Rounds

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline how anti-poverty considerations are taken into account in the monitoring rounds. (AQO 2885/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The spending proposals put forward by departments as part of the In Year Monitoring process are informed by a broad range of factors including the need to address poverty and social exclusion.

Departments identify and fully consider the anti-poverty and social inclusion implications on individuals, groups or areas and complete a High Level Impact Assessment for any proposed changes submitted in each Monitoring Round.

Business Rates

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what assessment has been made of the policy on business rates in Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQO 2886/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: A fundamental review of policy on business rates was undertaken by my Department, as part of the rating review initiated by the previous Executive in 2001. That review was taken forward under direct rule. It was a fundamental one and included an examination of the relative differences between NI and the rest of the UK.

The overall finding was that the system in NI, which is broadly comparable to that operating in the rest of the UK, was worth retaining. Some changes, however, were made. Direct Rule Ministers decided in 2003 to introduce the rating of empty non domestic properties at 50% liability and to begin the gradual removal of industrial derating. Both measures had the effect of aligning non domestic rating policy more closely with GB.

Although the 2007 review undertaken by this Executive following restoration was focused on the domestic system a number of important policy decisions concerning the non domestic system have been made by me and my predecessor, fully endorsed by the Executive.

The first of these was to give the go ahead for a revaluation of the non domestic sector in 2010, which will harmonise with the rest of the UK for the first time. [optional: Incidentally, a rolling rating revaluation of non domestic property is underway in the Republic of Ireland]. Secondly, to halt the removal of industrial derating. Thirdly, to introduce a rate relief scheme for our smaller businesses along the lines of the original Welsh model.

All of these measures will be given effect through the forthcoming Rates Amendment Bill, and I am currently engaged in the process of securing Executive approval to introduce it into the Assembly.

[I, and my officials, will continue to do all that we can to bring the draft Bill forward to the Assembly as quickly as possible. However, even with smooth Assembly passage, there is now a major risk that the legislation may not be in place by next April.]

In terms of my overall position with developing policy on non domestic rates, it is not one of automatic harmonisation with the rest of the UK. I will only do so where I think it is in the best interests of NI, particularly in terms of business impact but also taking into account the needs of government in NI, both this Assembly and our District Councils, who depend on the system for a substantial portion of their income. I hope I have the support for this measured approach from all sides of this Assembly.

Budget 2009-2010

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the implications for Northern Ireland of the UK Budget, delivered in April 2009. (AQO 2887/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Chancellor of the Exchequer delivered the 2009 Budget statement to Parliament on 22 April 2009. The main implications for Northern Ireland (NI) are in relation to changes in the NI Executive Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) over the period 2009-11.

In particular, the Executive received £116.3 million in additional funding over the years 2009-10 and 2010-11 as a consequence of the allocations announced for Whitehall departments in Budget 2009. However, this was

offset by the NI Executive share of the additional efficiency savings expected of UK Departments in 2010-11. The overall impact on the NI Executive DEL is a net reduction of £6.4 million.

Budget 2009 also provided some early indications regarding the overall growth in UK public expenditure over the medium term. There is likely to be a marked slowdown in the growth of current expenditure while the level of capital investment will decline.

In addition, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a number of UK wide measures which will benefit NI citizens and businesses, including increases to Winter Fuel Allowance and Child Tax Credit as well as the introduction of a Vehicle Scrappage scheme.

Stormont Estate

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the policy on the use of the grounds of the Stormont estate by outside groups and bodies. (AQO 2888/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In recognition that the Stormont Estate is considered to be public grounds the Department seeks to accommodate requests for use of the grounds where possible.

Any request to hold an event in the grounds of the Stormont Estate by an outside group or body is considered with respect to a number of factors, such as the impact on the normal business of the Estate, the impact on the grounds and the likely impact on local residents.

The organisers of all large events must seek my approval and must be able to demonstrate that they have the ability to organise and successfully manage such an event. Furthermore they must have adequate liability insurance and have in place appropriate health and safety procedures.

Approval is not normally required for smaller events where the impact on the surroundings is likely to be much lower e.g. wedding photographs, local primary school sponsored walks.

Account NI

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the roll-out of Account NI.

(AQO 2889/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Account NI has been providing a 'live' service to nine NICS departments.

The latest departments - DE, DCAL, and DARD (including AFBI) - migrated to the Account NI system on 6 April. Account NI remains on schedule for implementation of the remaining departments - DRD (including Roads Service) and DOE - in July 2009.

Since going live with the new system, Account NI has processed over 200,000 payments valued in excess of £1.7 billion. Currently some 4,000 payments are being processed every week.

Account NI has been working with departments in support of my directive for invoices to be paid within 10 working days. Since this announcement in November over 36,000 invoices have been paid within 10 days, releasing over £117 million to suppliers. In April the average

performance across all departments on Account NI was 58% (7,229 invoices) paid within the target.

Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit

Ms Purvis asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the cost of setting up the Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit; and to give an assessment of the amount of efficiencies it has delivered. (AQO 2890/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: PEDU was launched with a statement to the Assembly on 15 April 2008. In its first year of operation, the expenditure within PEDU has been:

| Salaries | GAE | Total |
|----------|----------|----------|
| £145,753 | £112,743 | £258,496 |

Included in the above are the costs related to the reviews of the Planning Service and Land and Property Services, and also costs associated with the Ministerial advisory panel linked to PEDU.

In relation to efficiencies, both reviews carried out to date have been focused on delivery. However, Efficiency will be a natural consequence

of the reviews, since improved delivery will ultimately lead to a better and more efficient use of resources.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Public Heath Agency

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost for the establishment of the new Public Heath Agency. (AQW 7025/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): It is not possible to disaggregate the project costs associated with the creation of the new Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being from the overall expenditure on the programme to implement all of the Health and Social Care reforms. However, the Department is able to identify a cost of approximately £26,700 specifically associated with the establishment of the new Agency.

Public Heath Agency

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many administration staff are employed in the new Public Health Agency broken down by grade. (AQW 7026/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the table below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF ADMINISTRATION STAFF BY GRADE EMPLOYED BY THE PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY AS AT APRIL 2009.

| Grade | Administration Staff | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| | Headcount | WTE |
| Chief Executive / Director / Band 8 | 6 | 6.00 |
| Band 7 | 6 | 5.90 |
| Band 6 | 27 | 24.15 |
| Band 5 | 13 | 13.00 |
| Band 4 | 24 | 22.02 |
| Band 3 | 25 | 22.82 |
| Band 2 | 6 | 4.42 |
| Total | 107 | 98.31 |

Source: Public Health Agency.

Notes:

- Figures include staff mapped to the Public Health Agency from the former HSS Boards, Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland (HPANI) and the Healthcare associated Infection Surveillance Centre (HISC) as at 1 April 2009.
- Figures include Operations staff involved in Information / Knowledge Management, Communications, and Business & Administrative Support roles, as well as Senior Management (Chief Executive and Directors).
- WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.

Capitation Formula Review Group

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2456/08, to detail the amount of (i) under funding; and (ii) over funding, for each Health and Social Care Trust area, in the (a) previous; and (b) current financial year; and to advise when the recommendations of the Fourth Report from the Capitation Formula Review Group will be fully implemented. (AQW 7157/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Under or overfunding is calculated at commissioner level. For 2008/09, the commissioners were the previous four Health and Social Care Boards and their over and underfunding levels based on the Fourth Report of the Capitation Formula were as follows:

LEVELS OF OVER OR UNDER FUNDING £M

| HSSB | 2008/09 £m over /(under) from target share |
|-------|--|
| EHSSB | 20.0 |
| NHSSB | -8.3 |
| SHSSB | -8.3 |
| WHSSB | -3.4 |

Figures are not yet available for the 2009/10 year as allocations are still being confirmed.

The Fourth Review of the capitation formula recommended that the component elements of the formula relating to Acute Services and Elderly Care be updated. This has now taken place and the revised formula was implemented on 1st April 2009.

Foster Carers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many registered foster carers are providing foster care placements in excess of the 'usual fostering limit' of three, broken down by Health & Social Care Trust area. (AQW 7479/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In response, Health & Social Care Trusts provided information in the table below for the position as at 8 May 2009.

| HSC Trust | 2007/2008 |
|-------------------------|-----------|
| Belfast HSC Trust | 15 |
| Northern HSC Trust | 6 |
| South Eastern HSC Trust | 3 |
| Southern HSC Trust | 13 |
| Western HSC Trust | 4 |
| Northern Ireland | 41 |

Brain Angiogram Appointments

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many brain angiogram appointments have been cancelled at the Royal Victoria Hospital in the last 12 months because of bed shortages in the Neurology Department. (AQW 7499/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There were 78 brain angiogram appointments booked for examination during 2008/2009 of which 51 were initially cancelled.

These cancellations were due to unavailability of beds within Ward 4e in the Royal Victoria Hospital, which should not be defined as neurology bed shortages.

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust have sufficient neurology beds, but due to volumes of emergency medical admissions, these will at times be prioritised for emergency admissions. Consequently, some electively booked patients will have their appointments cancelled and re-scheduled to accommodate emergency admissions.

Senior Civil Servant Bonuses

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much was paid in bonuses to senior Civil Servants in his Department in (i) 2003/04; (ii) 2004/05; (iii) 2005/06; (iv) 2006/07; and (v) 2007/08. (AQW 7539/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is outlined below.

| Year | No of Bonuses Paid | Total Amount of Bonuses Paid |
|---------|--------------------|------------------------------|
| 2003/04 | 20 | £93,150 |
| 2004/05 | 26 | £118,250 |
| 2005/06 | 26 | £156,500 |
| 2006/07 | 24 | £166,000 |
| 2007/08 | 20 | £160,750 |

It should be noted that the number and rate of bonus payments which can be paid to Senior Civil Service staff in DHSSPS and in all NI Departments is set by the Department of Finance and Personnel. The Department has no discretion to change the number and the rate of bonus payments made.

Management Consultants

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much has been spent by the Health Service on management consultants who were not directly involved in delivering frontline services, in each of the last five years. (AQW 7628/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The following table shows approximate amounts of money spent by HSC Trusts and Boards from 2004/05 to 2007/08 on external consultancy services, as reported annually to DHSSPS, which were not directly involved in the delivery of front line services.

| Year | Amount (£) |
|---------|------------|
| 2004/05 | 167,000 |
| 2005/06 | 149,000 |
| 2006/07 | 270,000 |
| 2007/08 | 96,000 |

Figures for 2008/09 are not available yet.

Female Problem Drinkers

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail all voluntary and statutory services and programmes that provide support for problem female drinkers in the Western Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 7772/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is a range of voluntary and statutory services in place for female problem drinkers in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area as set out below:

Voluntary and Community:

- Neighbourhood renewal project worker appointed and about to start in next few weeks in partnership with Trust in Omagh.

- Foyle Haven for both men and women outreach and drop in facility in Londonderry area.
- Solace for both men and women outreach and drop in facility in Irvinestown area.
- Northlands Treatment Centre for men and women.
- Hurt (Have All Your Tomorrows) for the user and the families of the user in Londonderry, Limavady and Strabane area.
- Foyle Valley House (North and West housing association).
- First Housing has a project worker in Enniskillen providing an outreach and drop in facility for both male and female.

Statutory:

- Alcohol liaison nurse in acute A&E in Altnagelvin and soon to be appointed in Erne Hospital for both male and female.
- Hidden Harm Social Workers in recruitment presently for Trust addiction services and childcare interface work for families.
- Alcohol and Drug Service for Limavady, Londonderry and Strabane area for both male and female.
- Community Addiction Teams in Tyrone and Fermanagh area for both male and female.
- Addictions Treatment Unit for residential care in Omagh (7 Beds for both male and female).

Fostering Regulations

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the Fostering Regulations Implementation plan has not been implemented. (AQW 7789/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is no specific implementation plan in place. The consultation process highlighted a number of issues with the Standards which underpin the Regulations. As a consequence the Standards and Regulations will be revisited. It is not anticipated that the Fostering Regulations will be made before April 2010.

Fostering Regulations

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the Fostering Regulations will only apply to the Independent sector. (AQW 7790/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 provides specifically for the regulation of independent and voluntary fostering agencies whilst statutory providers remain subject to the provisions of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and the Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.

Royal Victoria Hospital Client Liaison Office

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety pursuant to AQW 7330/09, the number of written harassment complaints, made by hard copy and electronic mail to the Royal Victoria Hospital Client Liaison Office against uniformed security staff during April and May 2008. (AQW 7820/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Management at the Trust have informed my officials that during the stated time period one written harassment complaint of this nature was made.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Protestant applicants within the Fire Service have been given positions at watch command level, in the Western command area in each of the past six years. (AQW 7831/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The total number of Watch Commanders appointed in the Western Area Command in the past 6 years with a perceived Protestant religious affiliation is shown in the table.

| Year | Wholetime Watch Commander Appointees | Retained Watch Commander Appointees |
|------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 2003 | 0 | 2 |
| 2004 | 2 | 1 |
| 2005 | 0 | 1 |
| 2006 | 0 | 0 |
| 2007 | 0 | 0 |
| 2008 | 0 | 0 |

There are currently 28 Watch Commanders within Western command area, 11 of which are perceived to be Protestant.

Of the 184 Watch Commanders currently employed by Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service 110 are perceived to be Protestant. I am advised that a Watch Commander competition is currently taking place.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many fire fighters at watch command level are currently employed in the Western command area. (AQW 7832/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The total number of Watch Commanders currently employed in the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service Western Area Command is 28.

Swine Flu

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of purchasing additional (i) anti-viral drugs; and (ii) vaccines, in relation to recent swine flu outbreak. (AQW 7844/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The procurement of stockpiles of antivirals is currently ongoing at UK level and precise quantities to be disbursed across the regions and associated costs have not yet been finalised. However the disclosure of these costs is being exempted under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 Section 43(2) Commercial Interests.

The vaccine has not yet been produced for swine flu but an agreement has been signed at UK level to produce a pre-pandemic vaccine. I have given agreement that Northern Ireland will pay for its share of the costs of the production of this specific vaccine once it is produced. I cannot provide figures on costs as this is also commercially sensitive and the agreements are still being finalised.

Action Cancer Bus

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQO 2412/09 (i) why his Department was unable to provide information on cancer detection by the Action Cancer Bus; (ii) if his Department liaises with Action Cancer in relation to the work undertaken by staff on the bus. (AQW 7879/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department does not hold information on cancer detection by the Action Cancer Bus, as Action Cancer is an independent charity.

In implementing cancer preventative measures, my Department works with all main stakeholders. Action Cancer and the Ulster Cancer Foundation are currently working collaboratively with my Department and the new health organisations, to prepare for the introduction of a bowel cancer screening programme from December 2009.

Computer Systems in Hospital Wards

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what computer systems are in place in hospital wards when making appointments for patients suffering from mental illnesses. (AQW 7960/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are a variety of computer systems in place in hospital wards but these are not currently interfaced with computer systems within mental health services in order to provide an electronic appointments system. Each Trust does, however, have procedures in place to ensure that mental health patients who need continuing care have a follow up visit by mental health services within 7 days of discharge from hospital. This process is a requirement of my Department's Priorities for Action 2009/2010.

For individuals presenting at A&E departments with mental health problems and who are assessed as needing ongoing care, a regional protocol has been developed for the issue of follow up appointments before they leave hospital. The protocol is being piloted in South East Trust over the Summer and will be rolled out across all Trusts by the Autumn 2009.

Complaints Made Against Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many complaints have been made against each of the five Health and Social Care Trusts over the last year. (AQW 7961/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the Member to my reply to AQW 4263/09.

Prescription Drugs

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many deaths have resulted from adverse reactions to prescription drugs issued by the health service in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 7962/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of deaths that have resulted from adverse reactions to prescription drugs issued by the health service in each of the last 5 years is not available.

Cleaning Products

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans his Department has to purchase cleaning, household or toiletry products which, including their contents, have not been tested on animals. (AQW 7968/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department uses the cleaning services that are provided under the Department of Finance and Personnel central cleaning contract. All cleaning materials and products that are used by the contractor are subject to the terms stipulated by the Department of Finance and Personnel in relation to the nature of manufacture and to relevant health and safety regulations.

I understand that the contract does not refer to animal testing.

Health Staff Personnel

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he can give an assurance that no member of health staff personnel will be subjected to victimisation or disciplinary action for bringing employment concerns to the attention of a public representative. (AQW 8004/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Public Interest Disclosure (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 gives significant statutory protection to employees who disclose information reasonably and responsibly in the public interest and are victimised as a result. HSC organisations are required to have Whistleblowing policies in place to meet the requirements of the Order.

I am therefore confident that all HSC Organisations have in place robust policies for dealing with whistleblowing in the workplace.

Family Support Workers

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the reasons for eight non- contracted family support workers based in Armagh and Dungannon being targeted for re-deployment, while their Craigavon counterparts are not. (AQW 8005/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Trust has advised that the Armagh and Dungannon Family Support Workers did not previously have contracts and following a review of the service these workers have been offered contracts.

To ensure equity of service provision across the Southern Trust a number of Family Support Workers from Armagh and Dungannon are being deployed to family support teams in various localities. This is being carried out in consultation with staff.

Creggan Pre-School Training Trust

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 7190/09, for an update on progress on a Service Level Agreement between the Western Health and Social Care Trust and Creggan Pre-School Training Trust. (AQW 8078/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Western Health and Social Care Trust has met with the Creggan Pre-School Training Trust (CPTT) and is looking to develop a needs lead Service Level Agreement with the CPTT in conjunction with the Trust Family Support Panel. This is being activity explored by the Western Health and Social Care Trust and the Creggan Pre-School Training Trust.

Dermatology Clinic in Daisy Hill Hospital

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the Dermatology Clinic in Daisy Hill Hospital, to outline (i) why people on the review list are having to wait over a year to be seen; and (ii) why people with a recognised and recurring condition are being discharged and not put on the review list. (AQW 8097/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Once a patient has attended their first outpatient appointment it is for clinicians to determine the clinical priority of patients, and no specific targets have been set for review appointments. However, should patients feel that their condition has deteriorated and requires referral back to the dermatology service; they can access treatment through the new nurse led pathway, which operates an open access appointment system on a self-referral basis.

In addition the Southern Health and Social Care Trust has established additional dermatology clinics, which will review 41 patients per week. These clinics started to see patients on 1 June 2009.

Family Support Workers

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, from 1 April 2009, (i) how many families are receiving assistance from a Family Support Worker; (ii) how many children are involved in these families; and (iii) how many referrals are awaiting assistance from a Family Support Worker, in both the Armagh and Dungannon areas. (AQW 8127/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: At 2nd June 2009;

- (i) 32 families in the Armagh and Dungannon area were receiving assistance from a family support worker.
- (ii) Information on the number of children involved in these families is not currently available.
- (iii) 7 referrals were pending allocation to a family support worker.

DEPARTMENT FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

NCP Contract

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development how many parking tickets issued since the inception of the NCP contract were appealed and how many appeals were successful. (AQW 4982/09)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): The current parking enforcement contract with NCP Services Ltd commenced at the end of October 2006. My Department's Roads Service has advised that, in the period to the end of December 2008, the total number of Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) issued was 327,267. During this time, the number of Challenges received by Roads Service's Parking Enforcement Processing Unit was 38,621, of which 25,484 were accepted.

The number of Representations received following the issue of Notice to Owner, which is sent after 28 days if the PCN remains unpaid, was 10,435. The number accepted was 2,348.

The number of formal appeals to an Adjudicator was 398 and, of these, the number accepted was 85.

Business Compensation.

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what compensation is available for businesses which lose revenue or are forced to close due to water blockages and shortages in the system. (AQW 7688/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it is a general principle that there is no entitlement to compensation for general economic loss which results from blockages and shortages in the system.

Vehicles Damaged by Potholes

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development the number of compensation claims received and the amount paid to owners of vehicles damaged by potholes and rutted surfaces, for each Roads Service section office area within the East Antrim constituency, in the last five years. (AQW 7813/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Unfortunately, my Department's Central Claims Unit does not hold the information in the format requested. However, Central Claims Unit does maintain a record of compensation claims details for each Roads Service Section Office. The area of the East Antrim constituency extends over three Section Offices. It includes some parts of the Ballymoney and Moyle Section Office near Glengariff, the Larne district within the Ballymena and Larne Section Office and the Carrickfergus district and three Newtownabbey wards within the Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus Section Office. Claims figures for the Glengariff area and the three Newtownabbey wards could only be extracted at a disproportionate cost. The following figures show the number of compensation claims received and the amounts of compensation paid by Central Claims Unit for each of the last five financial years in respect of damage to motor vehicles caused by potholes and rutted surfaces in the Larne and Carrickfergus Section Office areas and also in respect of all of the Newtownabbey Section Office area, which includes the Newtownabbey constituency wards.

| 2008/09 | No.of Claims Received | Compensation Paid |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Carrickfergus Section Office | 12 | £569.45 |
| Larne Section Office | 15 | £757.17 |
| Newtownabbey Section Office | 63 | £3,770.23 |
| Total | 90 | £5,096.85 |

| 2007/08 | No.of Claims Received | Compensation Paid |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Carrickfergus Section Office | 6 | £86.37 |
| Larne Section Office | 1 | NIL |

| 2007/08 | No.of Claims Received | Compensation Paid |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Newtownabbey Section Office | 27 | £4,158.39 |
| Total | 34 | £4,244.76 |

| 2006/07 | No.of Claims Received | Compensation Paid |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Carrickfergus Section Office | 9 | £1,793.37 |
| Larne Section Office | 2 | £131.23 |
| Newtownabbey Section Office | 26 | £391.89 |
| Total | 37 | £2,316.49 |

| 2005/06 | No.of Claims Received | Compensation Paid |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Carrickfergus Section Office | 13 | £2,312.05 |
| Larne Section Office | 3 | £250.00 |
| Newtownabbey Section Office | 19 | £1,994.74 |
| Total | 35 | £4,556.79 |

| 2004/05 | No.of Claims Received | Compensation Paid |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Carrickfergus Section Office | 18 | £873.60 |
| Larne Section Office | 9 | £99.87 |
| Newtownabbey Section Office | 34 | £3,161.88 |
| Total | 61 | £4,135.35 |

Consultants

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development how much his Department has spent on internal and external consultants, in each of the last three years. (AQW 7838/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The expenditure incurred by my Department on internal and external consultants in each of the last 3 years is set out in the table below:

| Department for Regional Development | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Financial Year | Internal Consultancy (£) | External Consultancy (£) |
| 2006/07 | 718,842 | 15,938,362 |
| 2007/08 | 386,186 | 1,839,078 |
| 2008/09 | 401,363 | 781,444 |

Residents of the Gransha Road, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the reasons for residents living on the Gransha Road, Bangor being told that part of their front gardens are now owned by Roads Service. (AQW 7850/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that when houses were constructed along a stretch of the Gransha Road, in or around 1973, the developer encroached onto a strip of Roads Service's land, which was included in the front gardens. This only came to light when some of the

property owners tried to sell their properties. The subject Roads Service land was already registered in Land Registers and is clearly identifiable.

Roads Service is trying to resolve this matter as pragmatically as possible and is in communication with Departmental Solicitor's Office to find the best method of regularising this.

Roads Service would encourage any individuals who may be affected by this encroachment to contact them.

Residents of the Gransha Road, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will be offering payment to residents of the Gransha Road, Bangor for maintaining Road Service property for the last 40 years. (AQW 7851/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: As I advised the Member in my response to his Assembly Question, AQW 7850/09, houses were constructed along a stretch of the Gransha Road, in or around 1973 and a strip of my Department's Roads Service's land was included in the front gardens.

The property owners have had the benefit and enjoyment of this land within the curtilage of their site since they purchased their properties. Roads Service has advised that payment to the property owners for maintaining the subject land would not be appropriate.

If property owners can prove at least 30 years uncontested use of the land, they may be able to claim possessory title to the lands. Roads Service is seeking advice from Departmental Solicitor's Office on the best method of regularising this matter.

Departmental Consultations

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development how much his Department spent on (i) Public Notices for consultations in local or regional newspapers; and (ii) other forms of media for consultations, in each of the past three years. (AQW 7856/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: In response to part one the department has spent the following on consultation in local or regional newspapers for each of the past three years:

| Year | Amount Spent |
|---------|--------------|
| 2006/07 | £18304.64 |
| 2007/08 | £7610.82 |
| 2008/09 | £18438.31 |

The table above does not include costs incurred by Roads Service as the compilation of this data would incur disproportionate costs.

In response to part two of the question the department submits a nil return.

Credit Cards

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) how many credit cards have been issued to his Department's staff for work purposes; and (ii) in relation to punitive bank charges on these cards, (a) how many have there been; (b) the total cost of the charges; and (c) the reasons for the charges, in each of the last five years. (AQW 7905/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department did not issue any credit cards to staff during the last five years.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development when Main Street, Rasharkin is due to re-open after ongoing NI Water work is completed. (AQW 7914/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it is anticipated the work ongoing within the closed road section of Main Street, Rasharkin will be completed and the road re-opened by Friday 19 June 2009. Work outside of Main Street will continue into the early part of July in order to complete the project which is aimed at reducing the risk of future out-of-sewer flooding.

Enterprise Service

Mrs Long asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) all of the sections of railway track on the Dublin line between Belfast Central and the border which are not certified for 90mph running; and (ii) all of the temporary speed restrictions in place. (AQW 7924/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink have provided the attached table which details the sections of the track which are subject to permanent speed restrictions, and gives the specific restriction at each individual location. There is only one temporary speed restriction currently in place and this is also provided. The temporary speed restriction will be removed after bridge repair work is completed. This work is scheduled for completion August/September 2010 under the current programme for repairs.

| Permanent Speed Restrictions | | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|-----|--|
| Location | Mileposts | MPH | Comments |
| Adelaide – Balmoral (DOWN line) | 110.75-111.50 | 60 | Curvature, Points & Crossings |
| Balmoral – Finaghy (DOWN line) | 110.00-110.75 | 80 | Curvature |
| Derriaghy – Hilden | 106.75-106.00 | 80 | Curvature |
| Hilden – Knockmore | 106.00-104.75 | 70 | Curvature |
| Knockmore – Trummery (UP & DOWN line) | 104.75-99.00 | 60 | Track condition (Knockmore to Lurgan Relay Project to address) |
| Trummery – Moira (UP & DOWN line) | 99.00-98.00 | 70 | Track condition (Knockmore to Lurgan Relay Project to address) |
| Lurgan (UP line) | 93.75-92.50 | 70 | Track condition (Knockmore to Lurgan Relay Project to address) |
| Lurgan (DOWN line) | 92.00-93.25 | 70 | Track condition (Knockmore to Lurgan Relay Project to address) |
| Lurgan – Portadown (UP line) | 88.75-87.75 | 80 | Curvature |
| Portadown Station | 87.75-87.25 | 60 | Points & Crossings |
| Portadown Station & Approach | 87.25-86.75 | 40 | Curvature |
| Portadown – Scarva | 86.75-85.50 | 70 | Bogland |
| Portadown – Tandragee | 85.50-85.25 | 60 | Curvature |
| Portadown – Scarva | 85.25-84.75 | 70 | Bogland |
| Portadown – Scarva | 84.75-79.75 | 85 | Curvature |
| Scarva – Poyntzpass | 79.75-77.00 | 70 | Curvature |
| Poyntzpass Curves | 77.00-76.50 | 45 | Curvature |
| Poyntzpass – Newry | 76.50-70.75 | 70 | Curvature |
| Knockanarney – Newry | 70.75-70.25 | 60 | Curvature |
| Newry – Meigh | 70.25-65.75 | 75 | Curvature |
| Newry – Meigh | 65.75-64.75 | 60 | Wellington Cutting / Curvature |
| Advoyle – Border | 62.00-61.75 | 70 | Bogland |

| Temporary Speed Restrictions | | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|-----|------------------|
| Location | Mileposts | MPH | Comments |
| Poyntzpass – Newry (UP & DOWN line) | 74.75 | 40 | Bridge Condition |

Roads Service

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline (i) what plans Roads Service is proposing on the centralisation of administration staff in Armagh from other areas; (ii) what consultation has taken place with staff; (iii) if all equality issues have been taken into account; and (iv) if he will give an assurance that full consultation will take place prior to any decisions being made. (AQW 7929/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: There are currently no plans for the centralisation of any Roads Service administration staff in Armagh.

Andersonstown Gateway Study

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline what formal consultation took place between his Department and the Department for Social Development in relation to the publication of the Andersonstown Gateway Study. (AQW 7943/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: In July 2008, the Department for Social Development (DSD) approached my Department's Regional Planning and Transportation Division, requesting a representative to attend the project steering group, which was set up to oversee the Andersonstown Gateway Feasibility Study.

It was agreed that DRD officials would attend the group on an agenda specific basis and receive copies of the steering group minutes. No transport specific agenda items required attendance. I understand that a bilateral meeting took place, on 17 November 2008, with DSD and the consultant conducting the study, Colin Buchanan and Partners Limited, to discuss the Andersonstown rapid transit route. DSD has not requested further input since this meeting.

Neither Translink's Falls Depot District Manager, nor my Department's Division that deals with developments of this nature, have had any approach with regard to the Andersonstown Gateway Study.

My Department's Roads Service was not formally consulted by DSD prior to the publication of the Andersonstown Gateway Study. However, the consultant acting on behalf of DSD, did meet a representative of Roads Service in September 2008, to seek information regarding any Roads Service proposals and strategies for this area, as well as the extent of land under its ownership.

Northern Ireland Water has advised that it was not formally consulted during the preparation of the Andersonstown Gateway Study.

A2 Road Improvement Scheme

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the A2 Road Improvement scheme between Jordanstown and Seapark. (AQW 7944/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that following the publication of the Inspector's Report on the Public Inquiry, into the proposals for the A2 Road Improvement works at Greenisland in September 2008, the Direction Order and the Notice of Intention to Proceed were published in October 2008.

Work is continuing on the scheme development, with the Geotechnical Investigation contract, which was let in January 2009, due to finish in June. Further archaeological investigation work is planned for autumn 2009.

The DRD Investment Delivery Plan for Roads indicates an anticipated date of 2010/11, for the A2 Shore Road Greenisland scheme going out to tender, with an estimated completion by the end of 2012/13 financial year. Roads Service remains committed to this programme, subject to the availability of the necessary finance.

Andersonstown Gateway Study

Mr G Adams asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline what formal consultation took place between consultants carrying out the Andersonstown Gateway Study and (i) Translink in relation to the Falls Road Depot; (ii) Roads Service in relation to the proposed bridge at Kennedy Way; and (iii) Northern Ireland Water in relation to the Waste Water Treatment Works in Kennedy Way. (AQW 7948/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Neither Translink's Falls Depot District Manager, nor my Department's Division that deals with developments of this nature, have had any approach with regard to the Andersonstown Gateway Study.

I am advised by Translink, that the Property Department Programme Manager and the Falls Depot District Manager met with Belfast City Council about 18 months ago. However, this was in relation to depot frontage and aesthetic improvements, as opposed to anything more substantial.

My Department's Roads Service has not been formally consulted regarding the proposed bridge at Kennedy Way, prior to the publication of the Andersonstown Gateway Study.

Northern Ireland Water has advised that it was not formally consulted during the preparation of the Andersonstown Gateway Study.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline why Northern Ireland Water was able to restore water pressure at Ballybryan Road, Greyabbey on Thursday 21/05/09 to find a leak, but was not able to increase water pressure to enable householders to carry out normal household duties. (AQW 7953/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the reduction in water pressure in the Ballybryan Road area on 19, 20 and 21 May 2009 resulted from a burst watermain in a field opposite to No 14 Ballybryan Road. NIW did not increase water pressure in order to detect the cause of the problem; the pressure was restored when the burst main was repaired on Thursday 21 May.

Following further technical reviews of the supply system serving the Ards peninsula, NIW has implemented a revised pressure regime in the trunk main system in order to protect the pipework and to increase the security of supply to all of its customers in the area. NIW is investigating the operational viability of installing a small booster station in the vicinity of Ballybryan Road to temporarily alleviate current pressure difficulties while network analysis is continuing to identify the most viable permanent solution. I understand that the investigations will be completed shortly and I have asked NIW's Interim Director of Operations, David Dangerfield, to write to you to inform you of the outcome and any action that NIW proposes to take.

Cleaning Products

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to purchase cleaning, household or toiletry products which, including their contents, have not been tested on animals. (AQW 7979/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department is not responsible for letting contracts for cleaning. These are organised centrally through the Central Purchasing Division within DFP.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to explain why there was poor water pressure on 19, 20, and 21 May at Ballybryan Road, Greyabbey and why the water pressure was not restored until 21 May 2009. (AQW 7981/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that their customer relations centre was informed of a reduction in water pressure in the Ballybryan Road area at approximately 2pm on Tuesday 19 May 2009 and immediately instigated investigations to determine the cause. Unfortunately difficulties were experienced locating the source of the problem because there was no visible physical evidence of

a burst main in the vicinity and a more extensive inspection of the area had to be undertaken. Late on the evening of Wednesday 20 May the source was traced to a burst water main in a field opposite 14 Ballybryan Road. Repair work commenced at 9 o'clock the next morning and water pressure to all affected properties was restored by 3.30pm.

Road Resurfacing Work

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 1773/09, concerning the Ballyhalbert to Ballywalter road, if is he aware that the road is still unfinished and will he give an assurance that it will be fixed in this financial year. (AQW 8128/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that no further major works have been carried out on the A2 Ballyhalbert to Ballywalter Road since my earlier reply to AQW 1773/09.

Allocations for the 2009/10 financial year have recently been received, and work programmes are currently being finalised for presentation to Ards Borough Council at its Co-ordinating Committee meeting on 22 June 2009.

You will appreciate that there are many roads competing for the limited funding available, therefore, it is not possible to give any assurance that resurfacing of this stretch of road will be carried out this financial year.

DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings Scheme

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings scheme (i) to outline the criteria for assistance; (ii) how many applications have been made; (iii) how many applications were approved; and (iv) how much money was made available through the scheme, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 7849/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings scheme is statutorily based under the Northern Ireland (Housing) Order 1988 enabling the Housing Executive to acquire homes by agreement where their owners are unwilling or unable to occupy them in consequence of acts of violence or, threats to commit such acts or other intimidation.

In relation to (i) the eligibility criteria for the scheme are:

- the house must be owner occupied and must be the applicant's only or principal home; and
- the Housing Executive must receive a certificate from the office of the Chief Constable of the PSNI stating clearly it is unsafe for the applicant or a member of his / her household residing with him / her to continue to live in the house, because that person has been directly or specifically threatened or intimidated and as a result is at risk of serious injury.

In relation to (ii) – (iv) the table below details the numbers of applications, approvals and the total expenditure with regard to the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings scheme for the period 2006/07 – 2008/09.

| Financial Year | Applications Received | Applications approved* | Purchases Completed** | Total Payments |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 2006/2007 | 62 | 46 | 22 | £3,242,200 |
| 2007/2008 | 60 | 35 | 22 | £4,963,290 |
| 2008/2009 | 100 | 46 | 45 | £9,394,181 |
| Total for period | 222 | 127 | 89 | £17,599,671 |

* Approved applications have been defined as those where Chief Constable's Certificates were issued. Not all of these applications would have resulted in the property being purchased.

** This may include applications made in previous financial years.

Larne Social Security Office

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development for a breakdown of customers using Larne Social Security Office (i) whose first language is not English; (ii) have a disability; and (iii) how this compares with the average across all other Social Security and Jobs and Benefits Offices. (AQW 7946/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is not recorded and is not therefore available. Customers whose first language is not English and need assistance are offered interpreting or translation services. Similarly customers with a disability are offered appropriate help commensurate with their individual needs.

Cleaning Products

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Social Development what plans her Department has to purchase cleaning, household or toiletry products which, including their contents, have not been tested on animals. (AQW 7966/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department for Social Development does not have any plans to purchase cleaning, household or toiletry products which, including their contents, have not been tested on animals.

The Department is required to use the Northern Ireland Civil Service Office Cleaning Contract 2006 for purchasing such products. This contract is managed by the Department of Finance and Personnel, Central Procurement Directorate, who have advised that the current contract does not contain any guidance on animal testing in relation to cleaning products.

Social Housing

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development if all new social housing will achieve a minimum Code Level 3, under the Code for Sustainable Homes, and what measures she will take to bring the existing social housing stock up to this standard. (AQW 8009/09)

The Minister for Social Development: As part of the New Housing Agenda that I launched last year, all new social housing built from April 2008 must now comply with at least level 3 in the Code for Sustainable Housing. In effect this means that this housing will now be 25% more energy efficient than before.

There are however nearly 115,000 social homes across Northern Ireland built before this code was introduced. These homes will comply with the standards applicable at the time they were constructed, such as the previous 'Eco Homes' standard.

Lands Adjacent to the Glen Road

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development who was invited by her Department to an inter-agency workshop in September 2008 about the development of lands adjacent to the Monagh Road and Glen Road in west Belfast. (AQW 8047/09)

The Minister for Social Development: A statutory sector workshop on lands at the Glen Road was arranged by my Department on 26 September 2008 to consider the need for and interest in taking a co-ordinated approach to the regeneration of a number of parcels of land adjacent to the Glen Road. The workshop was jointly chaired by David Ferguson (Deputy Secretary, Department for Social Development) and Peter McNaney (Chief Executive, Belfast City Council) and representatives of a number of relevant government departments and agencies were invited to attend. A list of those who attended is given below. Representatives of two major landowners, Turley Associates and Lagan Homes, were also invited to attend the workshop as observers.

At the workshop, it was agreed that the group should continue to meet at appropriate stages as a 'development co-ordination group,' in order to facilitate a coordinated approach to future work. This 'development co-ordination group' was reconvened on 18 December 2008, primarily to consider the Terms of Reference for a research study proposal into the development potential of the relevant lands. This research has since been jointly commissioned by the Department for Social Development and the Strategic Investment Board, and a further meeting of the 'development co-ordination group' is to be arranged in June, once the final report has been completed.

LANDS AT GLEN ROAD – STATUTORY SECTOR WORKSHOP, 26 SEPTEMBER 2008

| | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| Director of Infrastructure Investment | DHSSPS |
| Representative (Knockbracken Healthcare Park) | Belfast Health and Social Care Trust |
| Director of Improvement | Belfast City Council |
| Head of Property Solutions Unit | Invest NI |
| Director of Strategy and Employment Rights | DEL |
| Head of Tourism, Agency Liaison and Equality | DETI |
| Head of Development and Infrastructure | DENI |
| Director of Housing and Regeneration | NI Housing Executive |
| West Belfast Strategy Manager | NI Housing Executive |
| Director of Strategic Planning | DOE |
| Director of Regional Planning and Transportation | DRD |
| Strategic Adviser | Strategic Investment Board |
| Director of Belfast Regeneration Office | DSD |
| Deputy Director, Belfast Regeneration Office (Greater West Team) | DSD |
| Deputy Director, Belfast Regeneration Office (Physical Development) | DSD |
| 2 officials, Belfast Regeneration Office | DSD |
| Representative | Turley Associates |
| 2 representatives | Lagan Homes |

Lands Adjacent to the Glen Road

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the terms of reference for the research commissioned by her Department into the development of lands adjacent to the Monagh Road and Glen Road in west Belfast. (AQW 8048/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department for Social Development and the Strategic Investment Board jointly commissioned research into the development potential of a number of parcels of land adjacent to the Glen Road in January 2009. The research proposal was “to explore for the ‘Glen Road Lands’: the extent of plans (current and proposed) of central and local Government and existing landowners for these lands; and the interest in, and ideas and proposals, for the commercial development of the lands.” A copy of the Terms of Reference has been placed in the Assembly library for information.

Lands Adjacent to the Glen Road

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the membership of the ‘development co-ordination group’ established by her to discuss the development of lands adjacent to the Monagh Road and Glen Road in west Belfast. (AQW 8049/09)

The Minister for Social Development: A statutory sector workshop on lands at the Glen Road was arranged by my Department on 26 September 2008 to consider the need for and interest in taking a co-ordinated approach to the regeneration of a number of parcels of land adjacent to the Glen Road. The workshop was jointly chaired by David Ferguson (Deputy Secretary, Department for Social Development) and Peter McNaney (Chief Executive, Belfast City Council) and representatives of a number of relevant government departments and agencies were invited to attend. A list of those who attended is given below. Representatives of two major landowners, Turley Associates and Lagan Homes, were also invited to attend the workshop as observers.

At the workshop, it was agreed that the group should continue to meet at appropriate stages as a ‘development co-ordination group,’ in order to facilitate a coordinated approach to future work. This ‘development co-

ordination group' was reconvened on 18 December 2008, primarily to consider the Terms of Reference for a research study proposal into the development potential of the relevant lands. This research has since been jointly commissioned by the Department for Social Development and the Strategic Investment Board, and a further meeting of the 'development co-ordination group' is to be arranged in June, once the final report has been completed.

LANDS AT GLEN ROAD – STATUTORY SECTOR WORKSHOP, 26 SEPTEMBER 2008

| | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| Director of Infrastructure Investment | DHSSPS |
| Representative (Knockbracken Healthcare Park) | Belfast Health and Social Care Trust |
| Director of Improvement | Belfast City Council |
| Head of Property Solutions Unit | Invest NI |
| Director of Strategy and Employment Rights | DEL |
| Head of Tourism, Agency Liaison and Equality | DETI |
| Head of Development and Infrastructure | DENI |
| Director of Housing and Regeneration | NI Housing Executive |
| West Belfast Strategy Manager | NI Housing Executive |
| Director of Strategic Planning | DOE |
| Director of Regional Planning and Transportation | DRD |
| Strategic Adviser | Strategic Investment Board |
| Director of Belfast Regeneration Office | DSD |
| Deputy Director, Belfast Regeneration Office (Greater West Team) | DSD |
| Deputy Director, Belfast Regeneration Office (Physical Development) | DSD |
| 2 officials, Belfast Regeneration Office | DSD |
| Representative | Turley Associates |
| 2 representatives | Lagan Homes |

Lands Adjacent to the Glen Road

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the terms of reference for the 'development co-ordination group' established by her to discuss the development of lands adjacent to the Monagh Road and Glen Road in west Belfast and to specify how many times this group has met. (AQW 8050/09)

The Minister for Social Development: A statutory sector workshop on lands at the Glen Road was arranged by my Department on 26 September 2008 to consider the need for and interest in taking a co-ordinated approach to the regeneration of a number of parcels of land adjacent to the Glen Road. The workshop was jointly chaired by David Ferguson (Deputy Secretary, Department for Social Development) and Peter McNaney (Chief Executive, Belfast City Council) and representatives of a number of relevant government departments and agencies were invited to attend. A list of those who attended is given below. Representatives of two major landowners, Turley Associates and Lagan Homes, were also invited to attend the workshop as observers.

At the workshop, it was agreed that the group should continue to meet at appropriate stages as a 'development co-ordination group,' in order to facilitate a coordinated approach to future work. This 'development co-ordination group' was reconvened on 18 December 2008, primarily to consider the Terms of Reference for a research study proposal into the development potential of the relevant lands. This research has since been jointly commissioned by the Department for Social Development and the Strategic Investment Board, and a further meeting of the 'development co-ordination group' is to be arranged in June, once the final report has been completed.

LANDS AT GLEN ROAD – STATUTORY SECTOR WORKSHOP, 26 SEPTEMBER 2008

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--------|
| Director of Infrastructure Investment | DHSSPS |
|---------------------------------------|--------|

| | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| Representative (Knockbracken Healthcare Park) | Belfast Health and Social Care Trust |
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| Head of Property Solutions Unit | Invest NI |
| Director of Strategy and Employment Rights | DEL |
| Head of Tourism, Agency Liaison and Equality | DETI |
| Head of Development and Infrastructure | DENI |
| Director of Housing and Regeneration | NI Housing Executive |
| West Belfast Strategy Manager | NI Housing Executive |
| Director of Strategic Planning | DOE |
| Director of Regional Planning and Transportation | DRD |
| Strategic Adviser | Strategic Investment Board |
| Director of Belfast Regeneration Office | DSD |
| Deputy Director, Belfast Regeneration Office (Greater West Team) | DSD |
| Deputy Director, Belfast Regeneration Office (Physical Development) | DSD |
| 2 officials, Belfast Regeneration Office | DSD |
| Representative | Turley Associates |
| 2 representatives | Lagan Homes |

Lands Adjacent to the Glen Road

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development where her Department has established a group similar to the ‘development co-ordination group’ that deals with the development of lands adjacent to the Monagh Road and Glen Road in west Belfast. (AQW 8051/09)

The Minister for Social Development: A similar approach was taken in Derry in relation to the Clondermot site where a number of statutory organisations required the assistance of DSD in the production of a conceptual master plan.

Youth Provision in West Belfast

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what youth provision her Department funds in the Colin area of west Belfast. (AQW 8070/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department for Social Development, under the Neighbourhood Renewal Initiative funds two youth provision projects in the Colin area.

The Colin Neighbourhood Partnership has been awarded funding of £78,389 for the period 1 September 2008 to 31 March 2011, for the salary of a Community Development Worker whose focus is youth services and providing support for youth providers in the Colin area.

Funding of £67,806 has also been awarded for the same period to Youth Initiatives for the salary of a Youth Project Support Worker and associated running costs.

Lands Adjacent to the Glen Road

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development if her Department participated in a forum on Land Use convened by the West Belfast MP to discuss the development of lands adjacent to the Monagh Road and Glen Road in west Belfast. (AQW 8081/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Representatives of the Department for Social Development and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive attended 2 forums convened by the West Belfast MP to discuss the development of lands in west Belfast on 11 December 2007 and 26 November 2008.

Lands Adjacent to the Glen Road

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development whether the Minister for Regional Development made proposals to her regarding the development of lands adjacent to the Monagh Road and Glen Road in west Belfast. (AQW 8082/09)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department received a submission detailing DRD input to the overall objectives for the lands adjacent to the Glen Road, approved by the Minister for Regional Development, on 16 October 2008. The submission focussed on three issues: water and sewerage; roads; and the proposed rapid transit system.

Lands Adjacent to the Glen Road

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development (i) to state whether she reached agreement with other relevant Ministers on the terms of reference for the research being undertaken into the development of lands adjacent to the Monagh Road and Glen Road in West Belfast; and (ii) in relation to the remit and membership of a 'development co-ordination group'. (AQW 8083/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Agreement on the Terms of Reference for the research being undertaken into the development of lands adjacent to the Glen Road was reached by discussion among officials from a number of departments. The Terms of Reference were considered and amended by the 'development coordination group' on 18 December 2008.

Permanent Secretaries of DRD, DOE, DETI, DEL, DE and DHSSPS were asked to nominate officials at director level to attend a statutory sector workshop on lands adjacent to the Glen Road on 26 September 2009. Full membership of this group was given in my response to AQW 8047/09. At the workshop, it was agreed that the group should continue to meet at appropriate stages as a 'development coordination group.'

Jobs and Benefits and Social Security Offices

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development if she will review proposals affecting staff in Jobs and Benefits and Social Security Offices in east Antrim and any planned relocations and reconfigurations arising from the proposals. (AQW 8106/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I refer the member to my previous response to AQW 4152/09; and would re-emphasise, the proposals set out in the Strategic Business Review (SBR) are currently subject to an ongoing public consultation process which runs until 17 June 2009. I have made it clear previously at the start of public consultation in November 2008, that I will not make any final decisions including any potential relocations and reconfigurations until all the consultation responses have been considered.

Housing Executive Grant Aided Works

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 7612/09, to outline the total amounts of grant aid outstanding in each of the listed categories. (AQW 8193/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The tables below contain the following information:

TABLE 1. DETAILS THE ESTIMATED VALUE OF GRANTS CASES AT SCHEDULE ISSUE STAGE BASED ON THE HOUSING EXECUTIVE'S AVERAGE GRANT COST.

| | Armagh | | Newry & Mourne | |
|-------------------------|--------|---------|----------------|---------|
| | Cases | £ | Cases | £ |
| Renovation Grant | 53 | £722k | 232 | £3053k |
| Replacement Grant | 17 | £535k | 48 | £1512k |
| Home Repairs Assistance | 84 | £215k | 499 | £1515k |
| | 154 | £1,472k | 779 | £6,080k |

* Not all cases at schedule issue stage will progress to formal approval stage.

TABLE 2 DETAILS THE ESTIMATED VALUE OF GRANTS CASES AT DOCUMENTS COMPLETE STAGE BASED ON HOUSING EXECUTIVE'S AVERAGE GRANT COST

| | Armagh | | Newry & Mourne | |
|-------------------------|--------|-------|----------------|-------|
| | Cases | £ | Cases | £ |
| Renovation Grant | 18 | 245k | 16 | £210k |
| Replacement Grant | 5 | 157k | 2 | £63k |
| Home Repairs Assistance | 3 | 8k | 57 | £173k |
| | 26 | £410k | 75 | £446k |

** Not all cases at documents complete stage would have progressed to completion and attracted grants payments.

The estimated monetary value is on the basis of the average grant for each category within each area. However the Housing Executive does not anticipate that all of the grants cases referred to will progress through the approval process to eventual grants payment. Consequently the Housing Executive considers that actual grants spend will be somewhat less than the figures indicated.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

All Party Ethnic Minority Group

Ms J McCann asked the Assembly Commission why the all Party Ethnic Minority Group has, on a number of occasions, been allocated a meeting room in Parliament Buildings after prior booking, and then told to relocate to another room without any prior notice. (AQW 8074/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Neeson): Due to the demand on committee rooms within Parliament Buildings it is necessary to operate a system which assigns priority to Assembly Committees in the booking of Committee Rooms.

The Guidance Notes on All Party Groups and All Party Assembly Groups state that absolute priority is given to Assembly Committees in the booking of Committee Rooms. Unfortunately, other bookings, such as those made by All Party Groups and All Party Assembly Groups, are subject to change or cancellation if the rooms for which they are made are required by Assembly Committees.

Since the All-Party Assembly Group on Ethnic Minority Communities was established on 4 June 2008, it has booked rooms in Parliament Buildings for twelve different meetings. According to Assembly Secretariat records, it has been necessary to change the venue for four of these meetings because the room booked initially was subsequently required for a Committee meeting. However, records also show that on each of these occasions alternative rooms were allocated and notice of at least 5 days was given.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 12 June 2009

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Comments made by junior Minister

Mr Gallagher asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of Junior Minister Jeffrey Donaldson's view that Catholics owe their first allegiance to the Vatican state; and if this view is compatible with the Junior Minister's duties of promoting understanding and developing community relations and a shared future. (AQW 6881/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr McGuinness): Junior Minister Donaldson was not speaking in his capacity as Junior Minister. We do not comment on remarks made by Ministers when they are not acting in their Ministerial capacity.

Committee of the Regions

Mr Burns asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the dates of all meetings of; and (ii) the attendance records for the holders of the two full and two alternate seats in, the Committee of the Regions, in each of the past 5 years. (AQW 7337/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Councillor Edwin Poots MLA and Minister Conor Murphy MP, MLA were appointed as Northern Ireland's full members of the Committee of the Regions (CoR) for the current mandate (2006-2010), with Councillor Lord Maurice Morrow MLA and Councillor Bernice Swift as alternate members. In the previous mandate (2002-2006), Dermot Nesbitt and Alban Maginness MLA served as full members, with George Savage MLA and Margaret Ritchie MLA as their respective alternates.

As well as meeting in plenary session, the Committee has six sectoral Commissions, which meet four to five times per year. The table below gives the dates of all meetings of the Committee in each of the past five years.

| Meeting | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Plenary Session | 11/12 February | 23/24 February | 15/16 February | 13/14 February | 06/07 February |
| | 21/22 April | 13/14 April | 26/27 April | 22/23 March | 09/10 April |
| | 16/17 June | 07/07 July | 14/15 June | 06/07 June | 18/19 June |
| | 29/30 September | 12/13 October | 11/12 October | 10/11 October | 08/09 October |
| | 17/18 November | 16/17 November | 6/7 December | 28/29 November | 26/27 November |
| Territorial Cohesion Commission | 18 February | 4 February | 23 February | 31 January | 21 February |
| | 5 May | 29 April | 5 April | 16 March | 17 April |
| | 7 July | 29 June | 23 June | 23/24 May | 26/27 June |
| | 24 September | 23 September | 19 October | 14 September | 17 October |
| | 26 November | 25 November | 11/12 December | 9 November | 12 December |

| Meeting | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Constitutional Affairs Commission | 20 February | 3 March | 23 February | 27 February | 19 February |
| | 16 April | 22 April | 5 April | 2/3 May | 16 April |
| | 2 July | 17 June | 23 June | 3 July | 12 June |
| | 21 September | 21 October | 19 October | 17 October | 15 October |
| | 10 December | 12 December | 11/12 December | 7 December | 9 December |
| Economic and Social Policy Commission | 2 March | 7 February | 24 February | 2 February | 27 February |
| | 30 April | 25 April | 6 April | 30 March | 15 April |
| | 6 July | 20 June | 3 July | 28/29 June | 3 July |
| | 4 October | 30 September | 20 October | 28 September | 29/30 September |
| | 8 December | 30 November | 15 December | 16 November | 10 December |
| Sustainable Development Commission | 5 March | 1 March | 27 February | 6 March | 10 January |
| | 3 May | 28 April | 3 April | 19 June | 7 March |
| | 8 July | 28 June | 27 June | 2 October | 25 April |
| | 20 September | 6 October | 6 October | 4 December | 25 June |
| | 9 December | 1 December | 24 November | | 26 September |
| | | | | | 16 December |
| Education and Culture Commission | 19 February | 28 February | 1 March | 16/17 April | 28 February |
| | 5/6 April | 24 April | 4 April | 27 June | 29/30 April |
| | 9 July | 11 July | 20 June | 21 September | 1 July |
| | 22 September | 22 September | 28/29 September | 23 November | 25 September |
| | 7 December | 7 December | 30 November | | 17 December |
| External Relations Commission | 1 March | 11 February | 28 February | 25 January | 25 February |
| | 4 May | 26 April | 31 March | 29 March | 18 April |
| | 5 July | 30 June | 22 June | 31 May | 30 June |
| | 17 September | 15 September | 4 October | 19 September | 23 September |
| | 3 December | 7 November | 21 November | 7 November | 19 November |

AQW 5259/08 detailed the attendance levels of each of Northern Ireland's CoR representatives since the beginning of the current mandate in February 2006. An updated table correct to 1 May 2009 is given below.

| CoR Member | Commission | Plenary Sessions | | | Commission Meetings | | |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|---|---------------------|-----------------------|---|
| | | Number Attended | Number Open to Member | Dates of Attendance | Number Attended | Number Open to Member | Dates of Attendance |
| Edwin Poots, MLA | Sustainable Development Commission | 9 | 17 | 15/02/2006; 26/04/2006; 14/06/2006; 11/10/2006; 6/12/2006; 08/10/2008; 26/11/2008; 11/02/2009; 21/04/2009 | 5 | 16 | 27/2/2006; 03/04/2006; 27/06/2006; 27/11/2006; 17/02/2009 |
| Minister Conor Murphy, MP, MLA | Territorial Cohesion Commission | 1 | 11 | 26/04/2006 | 0 | 12 | N/A |
| Lord Maurice Morrow MLA | Economic and Social Policy Commission | 1 | 8 | 23/03/2007 | 1 | 18 | 06/04/2006 |
| Cllr Bernice Swift | Education and Culture Commission | 0 | 10 | N/A | 0 | 11 | N/A |

* Attendance data from April 2008 has been sourced from the Local Government Association, which provides the secretariat for the CoR UK Delegation. Information prior to the current mandate is not readily available.

Minister Conor Murphy MP MLA, resigned from the CoR with effect from 13 March 2008. Sue Ramsey MLA was nominated to take his place. Her appointment is due to be formally ratified by the Council of Ministers on 4 June 2009.

In keeping with the procedures for the UK delegation, alternate members serve on and attend separate Commissions; however, they may only attend plenary sessions in the full members' absence. While a full seat is vacant, the alternate seat is effectively frozen. Councillor Swift cannot attend until a replacement for Minister Murphy has been appointed.

The nomination procedure for the next mandate, to begin in February 2010, will be initiated shortly by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Senior Civil Servant Bonuses

Mr McGlone asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much was paid in bonuses to senior Civil Servants in its Department in (i) 2003/04; (ii) 2004/05; (iii) 2005/06; (iv) 2006/07; and (v) 2007/08. (AQW 7535/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The total amount paid in non-consolidated bonus payments to Senior Civil Servants in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in respect of the performance years from 2003/2004 to 2007/2008 is shown in the table below. The table also includes the number of payments made in respect of each year.

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

| Performance Year | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 |
|-------------------------|---------|---------|---------|----------|----------|
| Total Number of Bonuses | 18 | 19 | 16 | 20 | 19 |
| Total Value of Bonuses | £84,150 | £86,250 | £99,500 | £151,000 | £157,500 |

There is widespread public anger at the large bonuses being paid to public servants who are already in receipt of substantial incomes. As Ministers we share this concern and want a review to be undertaken on this matter.

UK Sustainable Development Commission

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has been made in appointing a Northern Ireland representative to the UK Sustainable Development Commission. (AQW 7716/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are continuing to consider this matter against the recent changes to the organisational status of the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC). In this context we, along with the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales and the Secretary of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), have recently taken membership of the newly established company. We continue to engage with the SDC at strategic level, and working with our colleagues from across the devolved Administrations, we have recently approved the appointment of a new Chair of the SDC. The appointment of a NI Commissioner remains a part of our plans to support the work of the SDC here.

Departmental Consultations

Mr Craig asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much it spent on (i) Public Notices for consultations in local or regional newspapers; and (ii) other forms of media for consultations, in each of the past three years. (AQW 7938/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The following table sets out how much OFMDFM has spent on (i) Public Notices for consultations in local or regional newspapers; and (ii) other forms of media for consultations, in each of the past three years.

| Financial Year | Expenditure | |
|----------------|--|--|
| | Public Notices for consultations in local or regional newspapers | Other forms of media for consultations |
| 2006/07 | £2,368 | £5,850 |
| 2007/08 | £17,987 | £546 |
| 2008/09 | £7,428 | £6,449 |

Women's Organisations

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in relation to the review on funding for women's organisations, to outline the (i) terms of reference; (ii) methodology; and (iii) timescale for completion. (AQW 8014/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Junior Ministers undertook to bring an interim report to the Executive on funding for women's organisations, in advance of a mid-term review of the Executive's Gender Equality Strategy. The aim is to help secure the best possible return on investment for women and for the communities to which they contribute, across all funding streams.

It is intended that the report will inform a wider exercise which will be part of the mid-term review of the current 10-year Gender Equality Strategy.

The terms of reference, methodology and timescale for completion of the review of funding for women's organisations have yet to be agreed. They are being developed in discussion with key stakeholders.

Gender Equality Strategy

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) if the action plan on Gender Equality Strategy will be signed off by the Executive in June 2009 as planned; and (ii) to provide details of the autumn conference. (AQW 8015/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Over the next few weeks, we will be considering refreshed cross-departmental gender equality action plans, one for men and one for women. We will consult the OFMDFM Committee on these plans in advance of Executive consideration.

The aim is to get the earliest possible consideration and agreement by the Executive.

At this stage there are no plans for an Autumn conference.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Animal and Public Health Information System

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to end the registration of animal births and deaths on the Animal and Public Health Information System by hard copy. (AQW 7991/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): I do not have any plans to end the registration of animal births and deaths on the Animal and Public Health Information System by hard copy at present.

Animal and Public Health Information System

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to extend the pilot project of registering animal births and deaths on the Animal and Public Health Information System by telephone. (AQW 7992/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

1. Following evaluation of the pilot, the Department is now in the process of considering options for the best way forward for this service. This will be conducted as part of a review of how we currently deliver Veterinary IRM (Identification, Registration and Movement) Services to our customers.
2. Until this review is complete no decision will be made on whether the service should be extended.

Animal and Public Health Information System

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to introduce only an on-line method of registering animal births and deaths on the Animals and Public Health Information System. (AQW 7993/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I do not have any plans to introduce only an on-line method of registering animal births and deaths on the Animals and Public Health Information System at present.

However, I do support and wish to promote all DARD on-line services as they offer many advantages to customers.

Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the removal of the supply of ice as a function of the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority, to outline (i) the process followed to arrive at the decision; (ii) who was consulted; (iii) if the decision required Ministerial approval; and (iv) if an Equality Impact Assessment was carried out. (AQW 8045/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: In March 2007 the NI Fishery Harbour Authority completed an internal strategic review of its facilities and the market demand for ice at the three harbours of Ardglass, Kilkeel and Portavogie. In light of the review the Board of the Authority decided to commission an independent business case to make a clear recommendation on a course of action for the Authority with regard to its ice plants. Interested parties from all sectors of the industry were consulted during the preparation of the Business Case which was presented to NIFHA in March 2008.

This concluded that the provision of ice could be more flexible and cost-effective in the private sector, rather than in the public sector and recommended that NIFHA offered the provision of ice in the ports (including NIFHA's ice plants) to the private sector.

The NIFHA Board decided to implement the Report's recommendations. This is an operational matter for the Authority and as such does not require my approval. However, when I met with the Board in September last year I indicated that I was supportive of the course of action that the Board decided to take which was to offer its ice plants for sale to the private sector.

In keeping with its statutory obligations the Authority carried out equality screening of the policy which concluded that a full Equality Impact Assessment was not required since screening did not identify any potential adverse impacts on the nine equality groups listed in Section 75 of the NI Act 1998.

Brucellosis Tests

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 7399/09, how many animals were tested in the 30 day pre-movement test for Brucellosis, in each of the Divisional Office areas, from 1 April 2008 to 31 March 2009 (AQW 8111/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The number of animal that had a 30 day premovement test carried out between 01/04/2008 and 31/03/2009 is as follows:

| Divisional Office | Number of animals |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| Armagh | 11,955 |
| Ballymena | 15,180 |
| Coleraine | 22,705 |
| Dungannon | 22,319 |
| Enniskillen | 24,800 |
| Larne | 16,584 |
| Londonderry | 7,046 |
| Newry | 18,199 |
| Newtownards | 14,050 |
| Omagh | 29,807 |

Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute Report

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) to detail the outcome of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute report commissioned by her Department on the experimental cockle fishery that took place in October 2008; and (ii) what plans there are to ensure a sustainable cockle fishery in Belfast Lough. (AQW 8115/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The survey work carried out by AFBI involved assessment of water quality during fishing operations together with pre and post fishery surveys of the benthic habitat and the cockle population. The report will be available later this month when the results of the latest stock survey carried out during week commencing 8th June are known. The report will inform decisions about whether there will be any further cockle fishery in Belfast Lough

Oyster Farm in Carlingford Lough

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how her Department applied the Conservation (Natural Habitats) Regulations (1995) to the recent application for an oyster farm in Carlingford Lough. (AQW 8188/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department is meeting its obligations under these regulations (which implement the Habitats Directive in NI) for all aquaculture licence applications, including the one referred to by the Member.

The Department has commissioned the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) to undertake appropriate assessments on all licence applications for new aquaculture developments, in accordance with the European Commission's methodological guidance on the provisions of Article 6(3) and (4) of the Habitats Directive. An assessment was carried out in this case.

Under the provisions of regulation 43(3) of the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc) Regulations (NI) 1995, the Department must also consult formally with the Department of the Environment and have regard to any representations made by it in relation to the completion of the appropriate assessment. The Department consulted with NIEA on behalf of DOE in this case.

The AFBI assessment will influence a decision on whether or not the Department is minded to grant the licence, as required under the aquaculture licensing provisions of the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966. AFBI produced a Test of Likely Significance on 26 February 2009 which indicated that, subject to certain conditions to regulate husbandry practices, the proposed oyster farm development is not likely to have a significant effect on the Carlingford Lough Special Protection Area. The Department therefore became minded to grant the applicant the necessary licences and proceeded to undertake a public consultation exercise on the granting of the licences in accordance with the provisions of sections 11A(2) and 132(2)(a) of the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966.

The Department subsequently received a number of objections to the licence application, many of which relate to the potential environmental impact of the proposed development on the Carlingford Lough Special Protection Area. The Department also received confirmation from NIEA regarding a review of the site selection features for the Carlingford Lough SPA which officials in both AFBI and DARD were unaware had taken place.

The Department has therefore asked AFBI to review the Test of Likely Significance in light of the objections and the additional information received and a decision on how to progress the application will be taken on receipt of the results of that review.

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Orange Culture and Unionist Traditions

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions he has had with the Arts Council about the Orange culture and Unionist traditions. (AQW 8072/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): As Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, I am firmly committed to ensuring that there is parity of esteem for all cultural traditions in Northern Ireland. I have ensured that the importance which I attach to this matter has been conveyed, through my officials, to the Arts Council and to the Department's arms length bodies.

Whilst the Arts Council does not provide funding for the expression of political identity, support and funding are provided for the artistic expression of cultural identity and for traditional art forms.

Programmes which contribute to this include the Musical Instruments for Bands Scheme and the Lottery funded Small Grants Programme (formerly Awards for All).

These are important programmes which provide much needed funding each year to arts and cultural organisations, many of which are seeking to express and celebrate their cultural identity through various art forms.

I have sought to ensure the effective administration of these programmes to enable such organisations to benefit fully from the funding available.

For example, I have instructed my officials to work with the Arts Council to bring forward the launch of the Musical Instruments for Bands Scheme. Consequently, the Arts Council launched the programme in March 2009 – two months earlier than in previous years. I understand that this will enable many marching bands to access funding with sufficient time to prepare for the marching season.

I will continue to ensure that the Arts Council and my Department's arms length bodies, through their work, reflect and promote the development of our culture and traditions.

Bonuses Paid to Permanent Secretary

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much was paid in bonuses to his Department's Permanent Secretary in each of the last five financial years. (AQW 8136/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Combined salary and bonus information for the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure, is currently provided through Resource Accounts in £5k bands, available from www.dcalni.gov.uk. It is our policy not to disclose the remuneration details of individual civil servants, other than in broad terms.

2012 Olympic Preparations

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to maximise the economic and social impact of all 2012 Olympic preparations. (AQW 8173/09)

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. The 2012 Strategy also includes the DCAL target to "seek to attract to host 10 countries or sports for Pre Games Training Camps".

This target was included in DCAL's Corporate Plan (PSA9 – Promoting access to culture, arts and leisure).

Fisheries Conservancy Board

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure following the transfer of the Fisheries Conservancy Board to his Department, for his assessment of the work of the Environment Agency in relation to the frequency of fish kill incidents. (AQW 8175/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Prevention and recording of pollution incidents is the responsibility of the Department of the Environment through the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. DCAL will continue to provide advice on reinstating waters where fish kills have occurred.

My Department is working with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, Water Management Unit to devise a strategy for reinstating fisheries which have been affected by pollution incidents.

Shooting Sports

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the monies allocated to shooting sports this year and how that compares to the past three years. (AQW 8176/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding. In this financial year, SNI has made an offer of £234,566 to the Shooting Federation of Northern Ireland under the Investing in Performance Sport Programme which covers the 4-year period 1 April 2009 to 31 March 2013. The allocation from this for the 2009/10 financial year is £10,000.

In addition to this, SNI has approved awards under the Athlete Support Programme for the April 2009 to December 2009 period to the following shooting organisations:

| | |
|---|---------|
| Ulster Rifle Association | £13,500 |
| NI Smallbore Shooting Association | £12,000 |
| Ulster Clay Pigeon Shooting Association | £16,000 |

SNI has allocated funding to shooting sports over the last three years as follows:

| | |
|---------|---------|
| 2006/07 | £28,000 |
| 2007/08 | £18,000 |
| 2008/09 | £69,500 |

Senior Civil Servant Bonuses

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much was paid in bonuses to senior Civil Servants in his Department in 2008/09. (AQW 8224/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Information on the total amount paid in non-consolidated bonus payments to Senior Civil Servants in the Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure in respect of performance year 2008/2009 is not yet available. It is anticipated that this information will be available in the autumn.

Poland – Northern Ireland International Football Match

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, as large numbers of football fans have already booked accommodation, if he will contact the Polish Football Association asking it to reconsider the change of venue for the Poland – Northern Ireland match in September. (AQW 8273/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for determining where an international football match is played rests with the relevant Football Association of the home country. It would be a matter for the Irish Football Association to contact the Polish Football Association if a change of venue was required.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Primary School Head Teachers

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education if her Department organised the meeting of primary school head teachers she attended in Newry on 24 April 2009, and, if so, how and by whom invitations were issued. (AQW 7540/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): At the meeting I had with Primary School head teachers in the Newry and Mourne area on 28 March, I agreed to have a follow up meeting regarding the issues raised.

The date and venue of this follow up meeting was agreed by my Private Office.

Review of the Programme for Government

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Education whether the first review of the Programme for Government has resulted in the inclusion of targets relating to early years investment. (AQW 7869/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-athbhreithniú bliantúil ar an Chlár don Rialtas á chur i bhfeidhm faoi láthair thar gach Roinn ag OFMDFM. Ní meicníochtaí iad na socruithe monatóireachta agus an t-athbhreithniú bliantúil a éascaíonn athruithe do spriocanna agus d'aidhmeanna laistigh de PFG/PSAnna. Mar sin, níl spriocanna ar leith ann faoi láthair a bhfuil baint acu leis infheistíocht luathbhlianta.

The annual review of the Programme for Government is currently being taken forward across Departments by OFMDFM. The monitoring arrangements and annual review are not mechanisms that allow changes to be made to targets or goals within PFG/PSAs. There are therefore currently no specific targets relating to early years investment.

Special Educational Needs Assessment

Ms Purvis asked the Minister of Education (i) how many children are waiting for a special educational needs assessment; (ii) how many of these children are suspected of having Autism Spectrum disorder; and (iii) the average waiting time for an assessment, broken down by Education and Library board area. (AQW 7891/09)

The Minister of Education: Seo a leanas na figiúirí is deireanaí atá le fáil ó na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne (ELBanna) maidir le líon na bpáistí a bhí ag fanacht ar mheasúnú riachtanais speisialta oideachais (SEN) i mí Dheireadh Fómhair 2008:-

The latest figures available from the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) regarding the number of children who are currently awaiting special educational needs (SEN) assessment are as at October 2008 and are as follows:-

| | |
|-------|-----|
| BELB | 267 |
| NEELB | 593 |
| SEELB | 421 |
| SELB | 516 |
| WELB | 242 |

These figures are in regard to children with a variety of need, including Stage 3 (non-statutory assessments) and Stage 4 (statutory assessments) of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (COP), reviews at Stage 3 and Stage 5 of the Code of Practice, special testing at transfer stage between primary and post-primary, preschool and examination arrangements.

Referral forms from all five ELBs require schools to indicate the main area of special educational needs with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) falling under the “Communication and Interaction” category. It is not possible, therefore, to separately identify children who are suspected of having ASD when they are referred for special needs assessment. ELBs do not record that a child has ASD until after the psychological assessment or diagnosis by the health sector.

With regard to the average waiting time for an assessment in terms of statutory requirements, at Stage 4 of the COP, ELBs consider the need for a statutory assessment of SEN which will include an assessment by an educational psychologist. ELBs have 16 weeks from the date that the ELB notifies the parents that it is considering making an assessment or from the date that the request to carry out an assessment is received by the ELB from the parent or the school to complete the assessment.

In terms of non-statutory assessments, the latest figures available from the ELBs, again as at October 2008, regarding the average waiting time for such assessments by an educational psychologist, at Stage 3 of the COP, are as follows:-

Belfast Education and Library Board – 43 days

North-Eastern Education and Library Board – 109 days

South-Eastern Education and Library Board – 158 days

Southern Education and Library Board – 56 days

Western Education and Library Board – no waiting list

Delay in assessment is one of the problems within the current SEN framework which the Review of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion aimed to address. The policy proposals which emerged from the review are focused on ensuring that each child who experiences difficulties with their learning is identified and provided with appropriate support, as early as possible, to help them achieve their full potential.

The policy proposals were first referred to the Assembly’s Executive Committee last July seeking agreement to issue them for public consultation. However, almost 11 months later, it is regrettable that I have not been able to progress the proposals as planned due to that lack of Executive agreement to issue them for public consultation.

I remain hopeful that my Executive colleagues will agree at the earliest opportunity to the issuing of the policy proposals for consultation to allow everyone involved the opportunity to contribute to the shaping of the final policy.

Schools in North Antrim

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what capital work is planned to be carried out at schools in the North Antrim constituency, in each of the next 3 years. (AQW 7913/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá trí phríomhthionscadal caipitil i dtoghcheantar Aontroim Thuaidh a bhfuil obair á déanamh orthu faoi láthair nó a bhfuil plean ann go ndéanfar obair orthu sa chéad trí bliana eile.

There are three major capital projects in the North Antrim constituency where work is either ongoing or planned to be carried out in the next three years.

Construction work to provide a replacement school building for St Patrick's & St Brigid's Primary School, Ballycastle on the existing site started in February 2009 and is due to complete in May 2010. Construction work on a new school building for St Mary's Primary School, Portglenone on the existing site has just commenced and is due to complete in May 2010.

A new school building for Ballymoney High School on its existing site is still in planning. The target date for opening is May 2012.

Non-Teaching Staff

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education how many non-teaching staff are employed in the controlled sector broken down by (i) Protestant; and (ii) Roman Catholic. (AQW 7921/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá gach ball foirne neamhtheagaisc i Scoileanna Rialaithe agus i Scoileanna Caitliceacha faoi Chothabháil fostaithe ag na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne.

All non-teaching staff in Controlled Schools and Catholic Maintained Schools are employed by the Education and Library Boards. The information requested is set out in the table below and has been provided by the Boards in respect of staff employed at 1 January 2009 funded under schools' budgets. Therefore it does not include staff funded centrally such as catering staff. The information also excludes those non-teaching staff working in the Grant Maintained Integrated, other (independent), other maintained and voluntary sectors who are employed by the Board of Governors of the individual school.

NUMBER OF NON-TEACHING STAFF EMPLOYED BY THE EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARDS AT 1 JANUARY 2009 (BROKEN DOWN BY SCHOOLS SECTOR AND COMMUNITY BACKGROUND)

| Board | Controlled Schools Sector | | | Catholic Maintained Schools Sector | | |
|---------------|---------------------------|----------|---------|------------------------------------|----------|---------|
| | Protestant | Catholic | Others* | Protestant | Catholic | Others* |
| Belfast | 1297 | 220 | 90 | 62 | 1330 | 42 |
| Western | 842 | 281 | 42 | 287 | 2017 | 65 |
| North Eastern | 3080 | 325 | 457 | 249 | 1287 | 244 |
| South Eastern | 1998 | 317 | 180 | 144 | 923 | 144 |
| Southern | 1606 | 274 | 52 | 100 | 2214 | 28 |

Note: The Others column at * indicates the number of staff in each of the schools sectors whose community background has been determined as neither Protestant nor Catholic; is unknown; or has still to be determined.

Non-Teaching Staff

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education how many non-teaching staff are employed in the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools sector broken down by (i) Protestant; and (ii) Roman Catholic. (AQW 7922/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá gach ball foirne neamhtheagaisc i Scoileanna Rialaithe agus i Scoileanna Caitliceacha faoi Chothabháil fostaithe ag na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne.

All non-teaching staff in Controlled Schools and Catholic Maintained Schools are employed by the Education and Library Boards. The information requested is set out in the table below and has been provided by the Boards in respect of staff employed at 1 January 2009 funded under schools' budgets. Therefore it does not include staff

funded centrally such as catering staff. The information also excludes those non-teaching staff working in the Grant Maintained Integrated, other (independent), other maintained and voluntary sectors who are employed by the Board of Governors of the individual school.

NUMBER OF NON-TEACHING STAFF EMPLOYED BY THE EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARDS AT 1 JANUARY 2009 (BROKEN DOWN BY SCHOOLS SECTOR AND COMMUNITY BACKGROUND)

| Board | Controlled Schools Sector | | | Catholic Maintained Schools Sector | | |
|---------------|---------------------------|----------|---------|------------------------------------|----------|---------|
| | Protestant | Catholic | Others* | Protestant | Catholic | Others* |
| Belfast | 1297 | 220 | 90 | 62 | 1330 | 42 |
| Western | 842 | 281 | 42 | 287 | 2017 | 65 |
| North Eastern | 3080 | 325 | 457 | 249 | 1287 | 244 |
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| Southern | 1606 | 274 | 52 | 100 | 2214 | 28 |

Note: The Others column at * indicates the number of staff in each of the schools sectors whose community background has been determined as neither Protestant nor Catholic; is unknown; or has still to be determined.

Enrolment Numbers for St Paul's College, Kilrea

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 7493/09, if she will order a temporary variation to the admissions and enrolment numbers for St Paul's College, Kilrea, to allow pupils to be enrolled for the academic year 2009/10; and if the college will be in a position to meet the demands of its applicants in future years. (AQW 7954/09)

The Minister of Education: Mar fhreagairt ar iarratais ón scoil, d'fhaomh an Roinn athrú sealadach ar líon iontrála na scoile don scoilbhliain 2009/10 ó 54 go dtí 62 leis an bhrú áitiúil atá san earnáil meánscoile faoi chothabháil a mhaolú.

In response to requests from the school the Department has approved a temporary variation to the school's 2009/10 admissions number from 54 to 62 to help alleviate local pressure within the maintained secondary sector. Whilst the granting of temporary variations can be used to alleviate short term pressures in an area, the medium to longer term position must be considered in the context of post-primary transfer policy, area-based planning of post-primary provision, and any capital projects which may necessitate a review of the school's long term enrolment figure.

I am conscious of the need for consistency between my Department's policy for considering requests for temporary variations, set in the context of wider open enrolment policy, and the range of other education reforms I am introducing. Policy in this area will require review to reflect the outcomes of my reform programme.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the proportion of pupils who currently receive free school meals; and (ii) the proportion of pupils aged between 16 and 19 who currently receive Education Maintenance Allowance, broken down by school. (AQW 8036/09)

The Minister of Education:

- (i) Athraíonn líon na ndaltaí a mbíonn béilí scoile acu ó sheachtain go seachtain. Tugann an t-eolas a bhailítear ar bhonn bliantúil tri mhóráireamh na mBéilí Scoile léargas dúinn, áfach, ar líonta na ndaltaí atá ag fáil béile scoile ar an lá a bhailítear eolas an móráirimh.

The number of children taking school meals varies from week to week. However, information collected annually from the School Meals Census provides a snapshot of the numbers taking meals on the day on which census information is gathered.

- (i) The number of children taking school meals varies from week to week. However, information collected annually from the School Meals Census provides a snapshot of the numbers taking meals on the day on which census information is gathered.

On the date of the most recent School Meals Census, 10 October 2008, the proportion of pupils who received free school meals was 15%.

- (ii) The proportion of pupils who currently receive an Education Maintenance Allowance broken down by school is as follows:

BELFAST EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

| School | % |
|--|-----|
| Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School | 19 |
| Ashfield Boys' High School | 62 |
| Ashfield Girls' High School | 51 |
| Belfast Boys' Model School | 69 |
| Belfast Model School For Girls | 68 |
| Belfast Royal Academy | 29 |
| Bloomfield Collegiate | 21 |
| Campbell College | 9 |
| Castle High School | 100 |
| Christian Brothers' Secondary School | 85 |
| Coláiste Feirste | 73 |
| Corpus Christi College | 100 |
| De La Salle College | 64 |
| Dominican College | 38 |
| Fleming Fulton Special School | 41 |
| Glenveagh Special School | 42 |
| Grosvenor Grammar School | 29 |
| Hazelwood College | 70 |
| Hunterhouse College | 34 |
| Little Flower Girls' School | 71 |
| Malone Integrated College | 67 |
| Methodist College | 12 |
| Mitchell House Special School | 71 |
| Orangefield High School | 73 |
| Our Lady Of Mercy Girls' School | 70 |
| Park Education Resource Centre | 54 |
| Rathmore Grammar School | 19 |
| St Dominic's High School | 59 |
| St Gemma's High School | 100 |
| St Genevieve's High School | 68 |
| St Joseph's College | 65 |
| St Louise's Comprehensive College | 77 |
| St Malachy's College | 42 |
| St Mary's Christian Brothers' Grammar School | 56 |
| St Patrick's College | 76 |

| School | % |
|--|----|
| St Rose's High School | 74 |
| Strathearn School | 20 |
| The Royal Belfast Academical Institution | 16 |
| Victoria College | 20 |
| Wellington College | 36 |

NORTH-EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

| School | % |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| Antrim Grammar School | 30 |
| Ballycastle High School | 36 |
| Ballyclare High School | 17 |
| Ballyclare Secondary School | 38 |
| Ballymena Academy | 22 |
| Ballymoney High School | 100 |
| Belfast High School | 29 |
| Cambridge House Grammar School | 38 |
| Carrickfergus College | 59 |
| Carrickfergus Grammar School | 35 |
| Castle Tower School | 50 |
| Coleraine Academical Institution | 35 |
| Coleraine College | 74 |
| Coleraine High School | 27 |
| Cross And Passion College | 65 |
| Cullybackey High School | 55 |
| Dalriada School | 35 |
| Dominican College, Portstewart | 50 |
| Downshire School | 38 |
| Dunclug College | 52 |
| Edmund Rice College | 57 |
| Garvagh High School | 100 |
| Glengormley High School | 53 |
| Hill Croft Special School | 50 |
| Jordanstown Special School | 63 |
| Kilronan Special School | 44 |
| Larne Grammar School | 30 |
| Larne High School | 58 |
| Loreto College | 29 |
| Maghera High School | 100 |
| Magherafelt High School | 75 |
| Monkstown Community School | 62 |

| School | % |
|---|-----|
| Newtownabbey Community High School | 100 |
| North Coast Integrated College | 82 |
| Parkhall Senior College | 100 |
| Rainey Endowed School | 35 |
| Riverside School | 18 |
| Roddensvale Special School | 47 |
| Rosstulla Special School | 62 |
| Sandelford Special School | 49 |
| Slemish College | 38 |
| St Colm's High School | 63 |
| St Comgall's High School | 66 |
| St Joseph's College | 62 |
| St Louis Grammar School | 24 |
| St Macnissi's College | 46 |
| St Malachy's High School | 100 |
| St Mary's College, Clady | 60 |
| St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt | 36 |
| St Patrick's Co-Ed Comp. College, Maghera | 47 |
| St Patrick's College, Ballymena | 44 |
| St Pius X College | 63 |
| Ulidia Integrated College | 51 |

SOUTH-EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

| School | % |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Assumption Grammar School | 31 |
| Bangor Academy And 6th Form College | 53 |
| Bangor Grammar School | 29 |
| Clifton Special School | 30 |
| De La Salle Secondary School | 100 |
| Down High School | 25 |
| Fort Hill College | 64 |
| Friends' School | 15 |
| Glastry College | 58 |
| Glenlola Collegiate | 20 |
| Knockbreda High School | 100 |
| Knockevin Special School | 33 |
| Lagan College | 36 |
| Laurelhill Community College | 51 |
| Lisnagarvey High School | 53 |
| Movilla High School | 100 |

| School | % |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Newtownbreda High School | 49 |
| Our Lady And St Patrick's College | 17 |
| Parkview Special School | 29 |
| Priory Integrated College | 39 |
| Regent House School | 27 |
| Shimna Integrated College | 52 |
| St Colman's High School | 57 |
| St Colm's High School | 92 |
| St Columbanus' College | 48 |
| St Columba's College | 63 |
| St Malachy's High School | 55 |
| St Mary's High School | 74 |
| St Patrick's Grammar School | 34 |
| St Patrick's High School | 55 |
| Strangford Integrated College | 46 |
| Sullivan Upper School | 11 |
| Torbank Special School | 32 |
| Wallace High School | 21 |

SOUTHERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

| School | % |
|--|-----|
| Abbey Christian Brothers' Grammar School | 39 |
| Banbridge Academy | 21 |
| Banbridge High School | 53 |
| Brownlow Integrated College | 100 |
| Ceara Special School | 45 |
| City Of Armagh High School | 29 |
| Cookstown High School | 42 |
| Craigavon Senior High School | 100 |
| Donard Special School | 73 |
| Drumglass High School | 56 |
| Fivemiletown College | 57 |
| Holy Trinity College | 77 |
| Integrated College Dungannon | 48 |
| Kilkeel High School | 41 |
| Lisanally Special School | 61 |
| Lismore Comprehensive School | 72 |
| Lurgan College | 39 |
| New-Bridge Integrated College | 53 |
| Newry High School | 47 |

| School | % |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Newtownhamilton High School | 100 |
| Our Lady's Grammar School | 41 |
| Portadown College | 34 |
| Rathore School | 47 |
| Sacred Heart Grammar School | 32 |
| Sperrinview Special School | 55 |
| St Brigid's High School | 100 |
| St Catherine's College | 61 |
| St Ciaran's High School | 60 |
| St Colman's College | 32 |
| St Columban's College | 100 |
| St Joseph's Boys' High School | 100 |
| St Joseph's Grammar School | 67 |
| St Joseph's High School | 64 |
| St Louis Grammar School | 45 |
| St Mark's High School | 58 |
| St Mary's High School, Newry | 62 |
| St Mary's High School, Lurgan | 100 |
| St Michael's Grammar School | 49 |
| St Patrick's Academy | 43 |
| St Patrick's College, Dungannon | 48 |
| St Patrick's College, Banbridge | 66 |
| St Patrick's Grammar School, Armagh | 39 |
| St Patrick's High School, Keady | 61 |
| St Paul's High School | 55 |
| The Royal School Armagh | 17 |
| The Royal School Dungannon | 29 |

WESTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

| School | % |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| Arvalee Special School | 57 |
| Belmont House Special School | 58 |
| Castlederg High School | 75 |
| Christian Brothers' Grammar School | 42 |
| Lisneal College | 73 |
| Enniskillen Collegiate Grammar School | 38 |
| Dean Maguire College | 71 |
| Devenish College | 47 |
| Drumragh College | 61 |
| Elmbrook Special School | 31 |

| School | % |
|--|-----|
| Erne Integrated College | 55 |
| Erne Special School | 58 |
| Foyle & Londonderry College | 38 |
| Foyleview Special School | 43 |
| Holy Cross College | 69 |
| Immaculate Conception College | 83 |
| Knockavoe School And Resource Centre | 78 |
| Limavady Grammar School | 38 |
| Limavady High School | 54 |
| Loreto Grammar School | 49 |
| Lumen Christi College | 33 |
| Mount Lourdes Grammar School | 55 |
| Oakgrove Integrated College | 61 |
| Omagh Academy | 42 |
| Omagh High School | 55 |
| Portora Royal School | 34 |
| Rossmar Special School | 100 |
| Sacred Heart College | 63 |
| St Brigid's College | 84 |
| St Cecilia's College | 78 |
| St Columb's College | 56 |
| St Comhghall's High School | 59 |
| St Eugene's College | 100 |
| St Fanchea's College | 53 |
| St Joseph's Boys' School | 88 |
| St Joseph's College | 86 |
| St Mary's College, Irvinestown | 100 |
| St Mary's College, Derry | 82 |
| St Mary's High School, Limavady | 72 |
| St Michael's College | 45 |
| St Patrick's & St Brigid's High School | 100 |
| St Patrick's High School, Dungiven | 66 |
| St Peter's High School | 86 |
| Strabane Grammar School | 49 |
| Strabane High School | 100 |
| Thornhill College | 53 |

Admission to a Nursery School

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Education how many children have been refused admission to a nursery school or nursery unit for September 2009, in the East Belfast constituency. (AQW 8040/09)

The Minister of Education: Chuir Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlaine Bhéal Feirste agus Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlaine an Oirdheiscirt in iúl don Roinn nach bhfuair 418 páiste a bhí ag iarraidh áit i naíscoil nó in aonad naíscoile do mhí Mheán Fómhair 2009 i dtoghcheantar Bhéal Feirste Thoir, nach bhfuair siad áit nuair a tháinig deireadh leis na próisis iontrála ar 1 Bealtaine 2009.

The Belfast Education and Library Board and South-Eastern Education and Library Board have advised the Department that 418 children seeking a place in a nursery school or nursery unit in the East Belfast Constituency area for September 2009 were unplaced when the admissions processes ended on 1 May 2009.

Broadbridge Primary School

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the delivery of a new school for Broadbridge Primary School in Eglinton and when the project will be completed. (AQW 8054/09)

The Minister of Education: Thug mo chomhghleacaí Conor Murphy MP, MLA, Aire Forbartha Réigiúnaí le fios go raibh oifigigh ón tSeirbhís Bóithre ina Roinn agus sainchomhairleoirí, atá bainteach le dearadh na scéime débhealaigh ar an A2, go raibh siad i dteagmháil le Príomhoide Broadbridge Primary School trí phlé agus trí chumarsáid scríofa maidir leis an tionchar a d'fhéadfaí a bheith ag an tionscadal ar an scoil.

The Department's Professional advisers are currently scrutinising a Feasibility Study (FS), which considers all the potential options to meet the accommodation needs of Broadbridge Primary School. Following approval of the FS, an Economic Appraisal (EA) will be undertaken to determine the recommended option for the capital investment. The EA is subject to the approval of the Department of Education and, if total costs for the scheme are over £5 million, the Department of Finance and Personnel. Following approval of the EA, the scheme will be eligible for inclusion in any future new starts programme.

My colleague Conor Murphy MP, MLA, Minister for Regional Development, has advised that officials from his Department's Roads Service and consultants, engaged in the design of the A2 dualling scheme, have had discussions and written communication with the Principal of Broadbridge Primary School in relation to the impact the project may have on the school.

Broadbridge Primary School

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education what discussions have taken place between her Department and (i) the Department for Regional Development; (ii) Roads Service; and (iii) other agencies, in respect of the impact of the A2 dualling project on Broadbridge Primary School in Eglinton. (AQW 8057/09)

The Minister of Education: Thug mo chomhghleacaí Conor Murphy MP, MLA, Aire Forbartha Réigiúnaí le fios go raibh oifigigh ón tSeirbhís Bóithre ina Roinn agus sainchomhairleoirí, atá bainteach le dearadh na scéime débhealaigh ar an A2, go raibh siad i dteagmháil le Príomhoide Broadbridge Primary School trí phlé agus trí chumarsáid scríofa maidir leis an tionchar a d'fhéadfaí a bheith ag an tionscadal ar an scoil.

The Department's Professional advisers are currently scrutinising a Feasibility Study (FS), which considers all the potential options to meet the accommodation needs of Broadbridge Primary School. Following approval of the FS, an Economic Appraisal (EA) will be undertaken to determine the recommended option for the capital investment. The EA is subject to the approval of the Department of Education and, if total costs for the scheme are over £5 million, the Department of Finance and Personnel. Following approval of the EA, the scheme will be eligible for inclusion in any future new starts programme.

My colleague Conor Murphy MP, MLA, Minister for Regional Development, has advised that officials from his Department's Roads Service and consultants, engaged in the design of the A2 dualling scheme, have had discussions and written communication with the Principal of Broadbridge Primary School in relation to the impact the project may have on the school.

Youth Provision

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Education to provide details of any youth provision her Department funds in the Colin area of West Belfast. (AQW 8073/09)

The Minister of Education: Tugann an Roinn Oideachais cistiú do Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt agus don Bytes Project fosta do sholáthar ghníomhaíochtaí seirbhíse ógra i gceantar Chollann in Iarthar Bhéal Feirste.

The Department of Education currently provides funding to the South Eastern Education and Library Board as well as the Bytes Project for the provision of youth service activities in the Colin area of West Belfast.

The Chief Executive of the SEELB has provided the following information on the youth provision which the Board is funding in the Colin area during the 2009/10 financial year:

| | |
|---|-----------------|
| The Saints Youth Centre | £95,000 |
| Colin Youth Development Centre | £132,000 |
| Lagmore Area Project | £40,000 |
| Colin "Reach Out" Project (Colin Neighbourhood Partnership) | £43,000 |
| SEELB Youth Integrated Development Project | £109,000 |
| Summer Intervention Funding | £13,000 |
| Funding to small voluntary/community groups | £3,000 |
| Youth Initiatives | £20,000 |
| Outreach Disability Project | £15,000 |
| Peer Education Training Programme | £25,000 |
| Total SEELB Funding: | £495,000 |

The Director of the Bytes Project has advised that the Poleglass Bytes Centre also operates in the Colin area. The allocation for 2009/10 is yet to be determined.

North/South Ministerial Council Teacher Qualifications Working Group

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) when the North/South Ministerial Council Teacher Qualifications Working Group will be re-constituted; (ii) what mechanisms will be put in place to promote greater teacher mobility between both jurisdictions; and (iii) what steps are being taken to resolve the issue of cross-border pensions mobility. (AQW 8077/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá mo Roinn agus an Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta (DES) ag obair leis an Ghrúpa Oibre ar Cháilíochtaí Múinteora a chur ar bun arís agus le clár oibre comhaontaithe a fhorbairt le tabhairt faoi dhúshláin atá ann faoi láthair. Tá mé ag súil leis, mar sin de, go mbeidh cruinniú den Ghrúpa ar siúl san fhómhar.

My Department and the Department of Education and Science (DES) are working to re-establish the Teacher Qualifications Working Group and to develop an agreed programme of work to address current challenges. I expect, therefore, that a meeting of the Group will take place in the autumn.

Given the centrality of the Irish language in the Primary School Curriculum in the south of Ireland, there is a requirement that all primary teachers should hold an Irish-language qualification (An Scrúdú le haghaidh Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge). As a result of the deliberations of the Teacher Qualifications Working Group, the requirements for attaining the Irish-language qualification have been relaxed to facilitate greater teacher mobility. However, I recognise that this requirement still presents a challenge for teachers who qualify in the north and, consequently, I have asked my Department to liaise with the Department of Education and Science with a view to facilitating provision in the north of preparatory courses for the Irish-language qualification.

Recent additions to the list of qualifying overseas recognised pension schemes in Britain and the north of Ireland, and reciprocal developments in the south of Ireland, should facilitate the transfer of the value of a teacher's accrued pension entitlements from one jurisdiction to the other. The NSMC has agreed that measures

should be taken to provide additional information on pension issues to teachers and others in the public sector who wish to transfer to work in the other jurisdiction. The NSMC Joint Secretariat in conjunction with Finance Departments and key stakeholders is now developing a plan to address the matter, including information on public sector schemes registered for the purpose of recognised transfers.

I CAN Early Years Centre, Ballynahinch

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education what steps her Department is taking to ensure the long term future of the I CAN Early Years Centre in Ballynahinch. (AQW 8084/09)

The Minister of Education: While the Department of Education (DE) recognises the crucial role of early intervention and provides additional funding to Education and Library Boards (ELBs) to develop provision for speech, language and communication needs, its remit on special education extends to the development of strategy and policy and not to operational delivery.

It is therefore the responsibility of ELBs to make provision for special educational needs in their area, as required by the special educational needs framework in legislation. DE has no role in directing ELBs as to how they determine the specific provision required to meet local needs.

The I CAN Centre in Ballynahinch is funded jointly by the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust and I understand that the SEELB has agreed to fund a shortfall in funding for the 2009/10 financial year.

Baineann ceist cistithe don Ionad i ndiaidh na bliana airgeadais 2009/2010 leis an Údaras um Oideachas agus Scileanna a ghlacfaidh freagrachtaí na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne ó Eanáir 2010.

Funding for the Centre after the 2009/2010 financial year will be a matter for the Education and Skills Authority which will assume the responsibilities of the Education and Library Boards from January 2010.

Teaching Opportunities

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) what steps her Department is taking, in conjunction with her counterparts in the Republic of Ireland, to promote teaching opportunities across the island of Ireland; and (ii) what plans her Department has to highlight the issue of teaching opportunities on an all-Ireland basis in the future. (AQW 8085/09)

The Minister of Education: Mar thoradh ar an obair a rinneadh ag Grúpa Oibre ar Cháilíochtaí na Comhairle Aireachta Thuaidh Theas, tá na rialacha maidir leis na cáilíochtaí atá de dhíth le bheith ag teagasc ó dheas i ndiaidh bheith maolaithe ag an Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta (DES).

As a result of the work undertaken by the North South Ministerial Council Working Group on Qualifications, the Department of Education and Science (DES) in the South of Ireland have relaxed the rules regarding the qualifications needed to teach in the South.

Only teachers employed in the primary sector, in Gaeltacht schools, in Irish-medium schools or who teach any subject through the medium of Irish are required to hold the Irish-language qualification (An Scrúdú le haghaidh Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge).

Teachers from the North who wish to teach in the primary sector in the South, but do not hold the requisite Irish-language qualification, are granted provisional recognition as a teacher by the DES and are allowed five years (rather than three years previously) to acquire the qualification. On attainment of the qualification, such teachers are then recognised as fully qualified in the south of Ireland. Provisionally recognised teachers are placed on the appropriate point of the salary scale and are entitled to qualification allowances, whereas previously differential rates of pay pending the acquisition of the Irish-language qualification applied.

Moreover, the two Departments of Education are currently liaising closely with a view to facilitating provision in the North of preparatory courses for the Irish-language qualification.

In order to inform students here about the teaching requirements in the South, and further to discussions between the General Teaching Council (GTC) here and the Teaching Council, Ireland (TCI), arrangements are in place whereby the GTC includes, as part of its annual presentations to all PGCE and final year BEd students,

information about the role of the TCI and what students here would be required to do if they wished to teach in the primary or post-primary sectors in the South.

Teachers Pay Pensions Administration Branch

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education how many teachers have lost out on incapacity benefit due to the Teachers Pay Pensions Administration Branch's failure to provide them with the Statutory Sick Pay 1 form, in accordance with the regulations. (AQW 8117/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá Foireann Riarachán Pá agus Phinsin na Múinteoirí eolach ar 2 chás nach bhfuair múinteoirí Sochar Éagumais mar gheall ar mhoill i soláthar fhoirm 1 do Phá Breoiteachta Reachtúil.

Teachers Pensions, Pay Administration Team are aware of 2 cases where teachers have lost out on Incapacity Benefit due to the delay in provision of Statutory Sick Pay 1 form.

There has been one ex-gratia payment of £271.32 issued to a teacher and a second ex-gratia payment of £1,166.56 for a teacher is currently being processed.

Where the Department has uncovered a delay in the issue of Statutory Sick Pay application forms from within Teachers Pensions, Pay Administration Team the full amount of financial loss, including interest if appropriate, has been reimbursed through issue of an ex-gratia payment.

Teachers Pay Pensions Administration Branch

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education how many ex-gratia payments have been made to teachers, due to the Teachers Pay Pensions Administration branch's failure to provide them with Statutory Sick Pay 1 form; and what is the total amount of payments made. (AQW 8118/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá Foireann Riarachán Pá agus Phinsin na Múinteoirí eolach ar 2 chás nach bhfuair múinteoirí Sochar Éagumais mar gheall ar mhoill i soláthar fhoirm 1 do Phá Breoiteachta Reachtúil.

Teachers Pensions, Pay Administration Team are aware of 2 cases where teachers have lost out on Incapacity Benefit due to the delay in provision of Statutory Sick Pay 1 form.

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Where the Department has uncovered a delay in the issue of Statutory Sick Pay application forms from within Teachers Pensions, Pay Administration Team the full amount of financial loss, including interest if appropriate, has been reimbursed through issue of an ex-gratia payment.

Teachers Pay Pensions Administration Branch

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education what steps her Department is taking to reimburse teachers who have suffered a financial loss as a result of the Teachers Pay Pensions Administration branch's failure to provide them with Statutory Sick Pay 1 form at the appropriate time. (AQW 8119/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá Foireann Riarachán Pá agus Phinsin na Múinteoirí eolach ar 2 chás nach bhfuair múinteoirí Sochar Éagumais mar gheall ar mhoill i soláthar fhoirm 1 do Phá Breoiteachta Reachtúil.

Teachers Pensions, Pay Administration Team are aware of 2 cases where teachers have lost out on Incapacity Benefit due to the delay in provision of Statutory Sick Pay 1 form.

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Where the Department has uncovered a delay in the issue of Statutory Sick Pay application forms from within Teachers Pensions, Pay Administration Team the full amount of financial loss, including interest if appropriate, has been reimbursed through issue of an ex-gratia payment.

Absence Management Policy for Teachers

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education what is the current status of policy TNC 2007/04, Absence Management Policy for Teachers. (AQW 8120/09)

The Minister of Education: Bíonn Imlitreacha TNC á n-eisiúint ag an Choiste um Idirbheartaíocht le Múinteoirí (TNC), ar a bhfuil ionadaithe ón Roinn Oideachais, ó na húdaráis arb iad na fostóirí iad agus ó na ceadchumainn aitheanta múinteoirí. Múnlaíonn an Coiste cuid de choinníollacha fhostaíocht na múinteoirí i scoileanna deontaschúnta.

TNC Circulars are issued by the Teacher Negotiating Committee (TNC), which comprises representatives of the Department of Education, the employing authorities and the recognised teacher unions. They form part of the conditions of employment for teachers in grant-aided schools.

The Circular TNC 2007/4 (Teacher Attendance Procedure), which was issued on 20 December 2007, has been superseded by the Circular TNC 2008/2 (Teacher Attendance Procedure), which issued to schools on 22 April 2008.

Holy Family Primary School, Magherafelt

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the progress of the newbuild programme for the Holy Family Primary School in Magherafelt. (AQW 8125/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá Staidéar Féidearthachta faofa ag an Roinn, a mholann foirgneamh nua don scoil ar an láthair sínithe atá ann cheana féin. Táthar ag ceapadh sainchomhairleoirí faoi láthair le Breithmheas Eacnamaíochta a dhéanamh chun an rgha mholta caipitil a shocrú don scéim.

The Department has approved a Feasibility Study, recommending a newbuild on the extended existing site for the school. Consultants are currently being appointed to complete an Economic Appraisal to determine the recommended capital option for the scheme.

Academic Entrance Exams

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education, as the majority of grammar schools are to set their own academic entrance exams, what action will she take in response to the concerns of schools, teachers and parents. (AQW 8129/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá beartas na Roinne Oideachais ar leagan síos critéar iontrála, sa Treoir 2010 rud a thabharfar chun críche i ndiaidh tréimhse comhairliúcháin.

Department of Education policy on the setting of admissions criteria is contained in Transfer 2010 guidance, to be finalised following a period of consultation.

I have written to all primary school principals and Boards of Governors on the issue of entrance tests, and will be responding directly to principals' concerns at a series of regional events on the subject during June. Teachers' concerns are being addressed in the form of advice provided by their union representatives, and principals and Boards of Governors of Catholic maintained primary schools have received advice on Transfer 2010 from the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. Parents who consider themselves to be in possession of evidence that delivery of the revised curriculum to their children is being affected by preparation for entrance tests, may submit a complaint through the appropriate channels for investigation, and if the complaint is upheld, ultimately, the Department may direct a school to fulfil its statutory duties.

New Primary School for Islandmagee

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education (i) for how long has a new primary school for Islandmagee been planned by the North Eastern Education and Library Board; (ii) when did the Board acquire the site for the development; (iii) why has the scheme to build the school not progressed; and (iv) when is it envisaged that the building work will commence. (AQW 8144/09)

The Minister of Education: (i) Bhí Moladh Forbartha a ligfeadh do bhunscoileanna Kilcoan agus Mullaghduibh bheith cónasctha mar scoil nua ar laithreán úrnua foilsithe ag Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt (NEELB) mí na Nollaig 2003 agus thug an Roinn Oideachais faomhadh dó i mí Aibreáin 2004.

A Development Proposal to allow for the amalgamation of Kilcoan and Mullaghduibh Primary Schools onto a new school on a greenfield site, was published by the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) in December 2003 and approved by the Department of Education in April 2004.

(i) A Development Proposal to allow for the amalgamation of Kilcoan and Mullaghduibh Primary Schools onto a new school on a greenfield site, was published by the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) in December 2003 and approved by the Department of Education in April 2004. (ii) The Board purchased the new site on 30 April 2007 and acquired additional land to provide sight lines in September 2008. (iii) Funding is not yet available for this project, which will compete for funding at the time of the next capital funding announcement. (iv) A decision has yet to be taken on the timing of the next announcement.

Preschool Education

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education how many (i) places for preschool education were approved; (ii) places were allocated; and (iii) applications were received for the places allocated, in the Southern Education and Library Board area in the last two years. (AQW 8164/09)

The Minister of Education: (i) Ba é líon na n-áiteanna cistithe réamhscoile a bhí ar fáil i limistéar an SELB sa bhliain 2007/08 ná 4,746. Ba é líon na n-áiteanna a bhí ar fáil sa bhliain 2008/09 ná 4,914.

(i) The number of funded preschool places available in the SELB in 2007/08 was 4,746. The number available in 2008/09 was 4,914.

(ii) The number of children admitted to funded preschool places in the SELB in 2007/08 was 4,757. The number admitted in 2008/09 was 4,938. The reason why the number admitted is slightly higher than the number of places available, is that each year a number of children with Statements of Special Education Need are admitted to statutory preschool settings. The admission of such children is not part of the preschool admissions arrangements and their places are additional.

(iii) The SELB have confirmed the number of applications received for funded preschool places in their area in 2007/08 was 5,036. The number of applications received in 2008/09 was 5,194. These would include applications in respect of younger children not in their final preschool year.

Primary School Foreign Languages

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education to outline the criteria used in selecting Spanish as a primary school foreign language and why it was selected instead of French or German. (AQW 8166/09)

The Minister of Education: Mar a luaigh mé sa fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 5187/09, thug mé isteach Spáinnis mar chuid den Chlár Teangacha Bunscoile as siocair gurb í an dara teanga is forleithne ar domhan í, i ndiaidh an Bhéarla, agus teanga atá ag éirí níos tábhachtaí ó thaobh na heacnamaíochta de.

As I stated in my answer to AQW 5187/09 I included Spanish in the Primary Languages Programme as it is the second most widely spoken global language after English, and an increasingly important one economically. It is of course open to schools to offer additional language learning opportunities outside of the primary languages programme, including in French and German, and I am pleased that many do this. There is a range of existing support arrangements already in place, including through CCEA and the Education and Library Boards for schools and, increasingly, post-primary schools are also becoming involved in supporting their primary partners. I believe that all efforts to provide enjoyable experience of language learning are valuable. The primary languages programme offers opportunities for our youngest pupils and it, along with the wider efforts of schools, will, I believe, encourage more young people to continue with languages at post-primary level and beyond.

Classroom Assistants

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education for the cost of classroom assistants employed to support children and young people in receipt of statements of educational need, broken down by (i) school; (ii) sector; and (iii) type, in the Southern Education and Library Board area, in each of the last three financial years.

(AQW 8169/09)

The Minister of Education: The first principle of the Data Protection Act 1998 prohibits the disclosure of personal information relating to an individual. As an analysis of these costs, if provided in the format requested, could possibly identify an individual's salary the costs involved can only be provided by sector.

Dá réir sin, tá tugtha le fios ag Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Deiscirt gur mar seo a leanas a bhí an costas ó chuntóirí ranga a bhí fostaithe le tacaíocht a thabhairt do pháistí agus do dhaoine óga a raibh ráitis ar riachtanas oideachais acu, i ngach bliain le trí bliana airgeadais anuas:-

Accordingly the Chief Executive of the Southern Education and Library Board has advised that the cost, for each of the last three financial years, of classroom assistants employed to support children and young people in receipt of statements of educational need is as follows:-

| | 2006/07 | 2007/08 | 2008/09 |
|----------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Controlled Nursery | £96,214 | £105,054 | £117,003 |
| Maintained Nursery | £26,100 | £38,855 | £41,874 |
| Controlled Primary | £1,920,145 | £2,073,734 | £2,268,230 |
| Maintained Primary | £2,696,849 | £3,068,045 | £3,533,568 |
| Controlled Secondary | £1,169,916 | £1,290,297 | £1,564,557 |
| Maintained Secondary | £1,450,011 | £1,597,297 | £1,981,640 |
| Controlled Grammar | £11,297 | £9,297 | £12,694 |
| Special | £1,912,715 | £2,125,983 | £3,209,417 |

Children with Autism

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education why her Department has not supported the Applied Behaviour Analysis for children with Autism, as per the evidence base recommended in the document 'None of the A's in ABA stand for autism: Dispelling the myths'.

(AQW 8172/09)

The Minister of Education: Bionn freagracht reachtúil ar Bhoird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne (ELBanna) as riachtanais speisialta oideachais pháistí a aithint, measúnú a dhéanamh orthu agus freastal orthu, páistí a bhfuil uathachas orthu san áireamh.

Education and Library Boards (ELBs) have statutory responsibility for identifying, assessing and meeting the special educational needs of children including those with autism. ELBs do so taking into account the individual needs of each child and there will therefore be variations in the provision made, based on the assessed needs of the child. Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) is one of many commercially available interventions for children with autism.

I am determined that all children with special education needs receive the very best start in life by ensuring that their education provision is tailored to their very different individual needs. Interventions for children with autism, in line with the recommendations of the Report of the Task Group on Autism, should be child-centred, not cost centred. The Task Group Report, launched in 2002, sets out very clear reasons why it would not be appropriate to advocate only one approach to meeting the needs of children with autism.

The Chief Executives of the ELBs have also advised that, following the allocation of additional funding by the Department of Education (DE) in the 2005/06 financial year, one officer from each ELB completed accredited training in ABA at Trinity College, Dublin. This represented a significant investment by DE in ABA in one year and subsequent to that teachers and officers in Boards' Autistic Spectrum Disorder Advisory Service have also completed this training. ELB officers have also had regular meetings with ABA professionals including

the authors of 'None of the A's in ABA stand for autism: Dispelling the myths' to look at ways of utilising ABA strategies in schools.

Post Graduate Certificate in Education

Ms Purvis asked the Minister of Education why decisions on intake allocations for Post Graduate Certification in Education placements are more than four months late and when she expects these decisions to be made. (AQW 8181/09)

The Minister of Education: Cuireadh in iúl don chúig institiúid ardoideachais ar 2 Meitheamh 2009 cinntí ar líonta iontógála d'oideachas tosaigh múinteoirí (ITE) do gach cúrsa sa bhliain acadúil 2009/10, gach Teastas Iarchéime san Oideachas san áireamh.

Decisions on the 2009/10 academic year initial teacher education (ITE) intakes for all courses, including those for all Postgraduate Certificate in Education courses were notified to the five higher education institutions (HEIs) on 2 June 2009.

The determination of intakes to courses of ITE is a complex process and there is a need to ensure that the numbers enrolling on approved ITE courses reflect the needs of our school system, not only in the short term but also in the longer

term. Of key importance this year was the need to give careful consideration to the recommendations set out in the Report on the Review of Teacher Education produced by the Assembly's Committee for Employment and Learning. There was also the need to take account of the recently announced increase in births and to provide the Department for Employment and Learning with the opportunity to present their views on the intake numbers prior to their finalisation.

Newbuild Schools

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education what provisions are in place to ensure that newbuild schools comply with the acoustics standards set out in Building Bulletin 93. (AQW 8203/09)

The Minister of Education: Tá an doiciméad "Acoustic design of schools, Building Bulletin 93, Notes to Designers" ar láithreán gréasáin na Roinne Oideachais. Sa doiciméad seo molann an Roinn gurb éigean go mbíonn gach mórsceim caipitil a fógraíodh ó mhí Márta 2006 deartha de réir BB93 Acoustic Design of Schools, le solúbthacht mar atá curtha síos sa doiciméad.

The Department of Education's website contains a document "Acoustic design of schools, Building Bulletin 93, Notes to Designers". Within this document the Department advises that all major capital schemes announced since March 2006 must be designed in accordance with BB93 Acoustic Design of Schools, with relaxations as described in the document.

A suitably qualified and experienced Acoustic Consultant must also be appointed on all major capital projects to carry out an initial noise survey, assist with design development, check design details and on-site construction, and to carry out acoustic tests to confirm that the building achieves the required acoustic performance.

DEPARTMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Careers Advice

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what systems are in place to provide professional careers advice for people at risk of redundancy and for those who have already lost their jobs. (AQW 7994/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): My Department agrees, arranges and delivers a support service to employers whose employees are at risk of redundancy. When the Department is notified that an employer is making or considering making redundancies, the local District Manager will outline

the support services available to both the employer and employees. The establishment of a redundancy clinic, usually held on the employer's premises provides information, advice and support to those facing redundancy. My Department's professionally qualified Careers Advisers play a vital role in these redundancy clinics offering redundancy counselling as a group activity or as an individual guidance interview.

In addition, there are over 100 Careers Advisers providing an impartial, all age careers information, advice and guidance service in JobCentres, Jobs and Benefits offices and Careers Offices throughout Northern Ireland. The service is available to people of all ages and backgrounds including those who are either at risk of redundancy or who have already lost their jobs.

Careers Advice

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how professional careers advice and its availability is being marketed to (i) employers; (ii) people at risk of redundancy; and (iii) people who have lost their jobs. (AQW 7996/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department employs over 100 professionally qualified careers advisers who are based in Job Centres, Jobs and Benefits and Careers Offices across Northern Ireland. The services of my Department's Careers Service are marketed through press articles, leaflets, the Careers Service and the Department's websites and through attendance at relevant events.

In the last year the Careers Service has exhibited at a number of events throughout Northern Ireland offering careers services to a wide audience including those potentially facing redundancy and people in or out of work. A recent Jobs Fair and Advice Forum in the Millennium Forum attracted 1754 attendees while a similar event in the Opera House last October had an attendance of over 1700 people. Careers Advisers were also available at the Jobscene event at the Europa Hotel and the Balmoral Show providing a professional, impartial all-age careers information, advice and guidance service.

In addition, the Employment Service District Managers visit employers who notify the Department of potential redundancies to discuss the range of DEL support services available, including professional careers guidance. Employers are provided with a set of "Jobkits" that are to be distributed to all those employees facing or under threat of redundancy. The jobkit contains a new leaflet "Find your way back to work" which sets out the full range of support services available to an employee facing redundancy.

The approach to marketing will be further developed in line with my Department's overall marketing strategy and the implementation of "Preparing for Success" the careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) strategy.

Careers Advice

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is the average waiting period for an appointment with a professional careers adviser. (AQW 7997/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department does not hold specific details of average waiting times for appointments with professional Careers Advisers. A rota system operates in most of the Department's offices to ensure that an Adviser is in attendance during office hours and where possible clients are seen immediately. Where this is not possible an appointment is scheduled, normally within 2-3 working days. Appointments with clients in partner organisations such as schools and training organisations are arranged to suit the client and the school/training timetable and usually take place on the premises of the partner organisation.

Further Education Colleges

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many people, at risk of redundancy or who have already lost their jobs have been referred by his Department to Further Education Colleges, training providers or other agencies. (AQW 7998/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: It is not possible to provide the information requested. However, the Employment Service is experiencing considerable increased demand for its comprehensive range of redundancy and work-focused services designed to help people find and remain in work. These are: redundancy

clinics, job search, job brokerage, work-focussed interviews, and the Department's range of employment programmes including Steps to Work, Pathways to Work, Progress to Work and specialist programmes and services for people with disabilities. In response to rising demand, the Department is increasing capacity in frontline offices including by recruiting 130 additional frontline staff.

Retraining Programmes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline how the retraining programmes for redundant workers are linked to the jobs that are available. (AQW 8064/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Steps to Work is an employment programme that offers a flexible approach to targeting individuals' barriers to employment. A good example is the work that is taking place in the Newtownabbey area where strong linkages have been established with large employers such as B&Q and Newtownabbey Council.

This approach has successfully demonstrated Steps to Work's ability to be tailored to prepare the unemployed to meet the needs of those employers who currently have jobs available.

Sector Skills Councils

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) with how many Sector Skills Councils his Department has contact; and (ii) how many have staff employed in Northern Ireland. (AQW 8141/09)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

- (i) The Department works closely with all 25 of the Sector Skills Councils.
- (ii) All of the Sector Skills Councils have staff employed in Northern Ireland.

DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Domestic Electricity Market

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline what efforts are being made by her Department to encourage competition in the domestic electricity market since the introduction of EU directive EU 2003/54/EC. (AQW 7983/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): This Directive was implemented in Northern Ireland via The Electricity Order 1992 (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005, the Electricity Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007, and the Electricity (Single Wholesale Market) (Northern Ireland) Order 2007. Whilst my Department was responsible for the implementation of the Directive, it is the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR) that has the principal responsibility for promoting competition within the Northern Ireland energy marketplace. NIAUR has recently formed a dedicated team tasked with establishing a regulatory programme to deliver competition, and has issued a consultation paper seeking views on how to improve energy retail competition.

The electricity supply market in Northern Ireland has been open to competition since 1 November 2007, when the Single Electricity Market (SEM) was established, which combined the wholesale power generation markets in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland for the purposes of driving down power generation costs.

My Department co-operates with NIAUR in its work to encourage new suppliers' participation in the retail electricity market in Northern Ireland. Since the introduction of the SEM there has been increasing interest in obtaining new electricity supply licences, and evidence of increasing electricity supply competition in the industrial and commercial sector. However, NIE Energy remains the only electricity supplier to the domestic market in Northern Ireland at present, and it may take some time to establish effective competition in this sector, given the small market here compared to the much larger market in Great Britain where competition is well established.

Construction and Quarry Industries

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what measures have been taken to prepare the Construction and Quarry Industries for new regulations that require all new homes to be zero carbon by 2016. (AQW 8008/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI has taken a number of measures to prepare clients in the Construction Industry for new regulations requiring all new homes to be zero carbon by 2016, including direct engagement with individual clients, dissemination of information from sectoral events and facilitation of best practice visits.

In particular Invest NI commissioned a scoping study into Future Opportunities for Sustainable Building Products involving consultation with a number of contractors and purchasers of building products, in addition to a wide range of industry bodies and associations.

A seminar entitled "Future Opportunities for Sustainable Building Products" was held on 4 June 2009 to highlight opportunities identified in the study within the design, construction, refit and maintenance of buildings and how Invest NI proposes to assist clients to take advantage of them. More than 40 companies attended the seminar.

Invest NI has also recently produced a series of five DVDs including one on Low Carbon Technologies which embraces integrated building technologies, to demonstrate Northern Ireland's capabilities in the renewables sector and these were launched at an event in May 2009.

Whilst the Quarry Industry lies outside Invest NI's remit, a number of Invest NI client companies have links to the Quarry Sector and Invest NI continues to work closely with the Northern Ireland Quarry Products Association.

Regional Tourism

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how she plans to develop the role of the Regional Tourism Partnership, particularly in relation to the Strangford Constituency and Strangford Lough. (AQW 8024/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I recently commissioned a review of local tourism delivery arrangements, including Regional Tourism Partnerships (RTP). The need for this review has been driven by a number of factors including the proposed changes to local council boundaries and the transfer of additional resources to support the tourism activities of the new councils resulting from the Review of Public Administration. The Review will be completed by the end of June and it will set out the proposed roles and responsibilities of all the major players involved in tourism delivery in Northern Ireland. The Review findings will be used to inform the development of a new Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland which will be published for consultation later this year.

In relation to the RTP which covers the Strangford Constituency and Strangford Lough ie Armagh/Down RTP I have been advised that it will cease operations with effect from 30 June 2009. Representatives from NITB have however recently met with the Strangford Lough Management Committee, Ards Borough Council and Down District Council to identify how best they can continue to work together to develop, manage and market the Strangford Lough area, which is recognised as one of Northern Ireland's key tourism assets. Plans are now being taken forward to develop an agreed destination development plan for the area.

General Consumer Council

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if the General Consumer Council held a staff "away day" on 21 May 2009; and if so (i) where it was held; (ii) how many staff attended; (iii) what percentage of the staff this represented; and (iv) to provide a breakdown of the total cost. (AQW 8037/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Consumer Council held a staff development day on Thursday 21st May 2009 as part of its programme to develop and train its staff. I understand that the objective of the event was to facilitate and encourage interaction between staff from different sections of the Council and to enhance team building. The event, which is held on an annual basis, is also designed to promote personal and career development for staff so that they can reach their potential, and to encourage them contribute fully to the achievement of the Consumer Council's Corporate Plan.

The details of the event are as follows:-

- (i) Staff took part in two separate activities; one in the Black Box (Cathedral Quarter, Belfast) and the other in the University of Ulster (Belfast);
- (ii) & (iii) 41 staff attended representing 91% of the Council's staff complement; and
- (iv) The total cost of the development day was £1,884, which was broken down as follows:-

| | £ |
|--|-------|
| Hire of Black Box facilities and cost of team building activities | 690 |
| Hire of University of Ulster facilities and cost of team building activities | 1,128 |
| Cost of refreshments | 66 |

The cost represents 7% of the Consumer Council's annual training and development budget and equates to £46 per member of staff attending.

Trade Visits

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the results arising from the trade visits to various countries she has undertaken and if jobs or contracts have been offered or confirmed.

(AQW 8065/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Since my appointment as Minister of Enterprise Trade and Investment in May 2008 I have led two Invest NI trade and investment missions – one to the United States where I completed an intensive programme in Boston and Silicon Valley, and the second to the Netherlands, which was the largest mission ever from Northern Ireland to a European destination.

Trade and investment missions are designed primarily to make initial contact with potential customers and investors and there is normally a long lead in time before new business and investment is secured. When in Silicon Valley I announced a new investment for Northern Ireland which will promote 16 specialised software development and support jobs; and in the Netherlands I witnessed the signing of a major contract between Wrightbus of Ballymena and a Dutch company to supply buses to the city of London.

Companies participating in these two missions have so far reported actual and potential new trade business worth £2.8 million.

Grants Scheme for Solar Panels

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if her Department would consider making larger grants available to those who are not on benefits to install solar panels.

(AQW 8066/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has not offered grants for the installation of solar panels since the closure of the Reconnect scheme on 31 March 2008. Following an evaluation of the scheme there are no plans to reintroduce the grant scheme at present, particularly as grants for household renewable technologies are available from the UK- wide Low Carbon Buildings Programme, operated by the Department of Energy and Climate Change. This programme does not distinguish between individuals in receipt of benefits and those not on benefits.

Regional Tourism

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, within the review of public administration, will local councils have responsibility for regional tourism.

(AQW 8131/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Local councils make an important contribution to the development of tourism in their local areas and the review of public administration offers an opportunity to enhance the role the sector can play in further developing the tourism industry. DETI intends to transfer £1.33

million of funding to the new councils to strengthen the role they play in relation to local product development and visitor servicing.

In the light of the review of public administration, and other factors, I recently commissioned a review of local tourism delivery arrangements. This review, which I have asked to be completed by the end of June, will set out the basis for new arrangements which will ensure greater efficiency in the development of regional tourism delivery.

The review recommendations will also feed into the development of the new Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland currently being taken forward by NITB and DETI and which will be published, following Executive approval, later this year.

Bonuses Paid to Permanent Secretary

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much was paid in bonuses to her Department's Permanent Secretary in each of the last five financial years. (AQW 8137/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Combined salary and bonus information for the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is currently provided through the annual Resource Accounts within a £5k range and is available from the Departmental website www.detini.gov.uk under Publications – DETI Financial Accounts Reports for years up to 2007/08. The figures which will appear in the 2008/09 Resource Accounts when published are £130k to £135K. It is our policy not to disclose the remuneration details of individual civil servants, other than in broad terms.

Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the progress made to date in working with the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation to implement a social tariff to help those in fuel poverty. (AQW 8148/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Lead responsibility for fuel poverty policy lies with the Department for Social Development, although there are issues which cut across several Northern Ireland departments. In May 2008, Minister Ritchie restructured the Inter-departmental Group on Fuel Poverty into a Taskforce, charged with developing and recommending proposals to ameliorate fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. The Taskforce proposals were brought to the Executive in September 2008, and included a recommendation on the feasibility of the introduction of social tariffs. It was acknowledged that further research would be needed in relation to this issue, particularly in terms of impact across different electricity users.

Since then the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation has progressed thinking internally in this area and has employed consultants to undertake a policy/option analysis of the options for implementing a social tariff in Northern Ireland including an examination of positive and negative effects associated with the various options.

The next steps will include a full public consultation on the report and further work in early Autumn to decide on a way forward and, if appropriate, implementation issues and timelines. This will include the need for supporting policy action by key Northern Ireland Departments, including legislation. The impact of any social tariff charges would need to be considered carefully and receive political endorsement.

Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline what progress she has made in working with the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation regarding Article 13 of the Energy End Use Efficiency Services Directive and when will this directive be implemented. (AQW 8149/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Energy End Use Efficiency and Energy Services Directive came into force on 17 May 2008.

Article 13 of the Directive is concerned with billing and metering. Existing legislation and standard metering currently provided already meet the requirements of Article 13 (1) of the Directive. Northern Ireland is also already compliant with Article 13 (2) and 13 (3) (a), (c) and (d) which focus on the provision of additional information on bills.

Following close liaison with the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, DETI consulted on Article 13 (3) (b) of the Directive and more generally on smart metering over a six week period 7 April – 19 May 2009. This consultation proposed the Electricity and Gas Billing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009, which amend the Energy Order (Northern Ireland) 2003 and which mandate electricity and gas suppliers to provide 12 months historical consumption data to domestic customers. This legislation has now been laid before the Assembly by the negative resolution procedure, and will be subject to the 21 day rule, before coming into operation on 22 June 2009. This will complete implementation of Article 13 in Northern Ireland.

The remaining articles of the Directive have already been implemented on a UK wide basis, for example the UK Energy Efficiency Action Plan was published in June 2007 and in compliance with Article 6 of this Directive, DETI has signed voluntary Energy Efficiency Business Agreements with all the major net bound and non net bound energy suppliers here, while DFP has signed similar voluntary agreements with all Government Departments.

Debt Advice Contract

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) to provide an update on the roll-out of the debt advice contract with Citizens Advice for the period up to March 2011; (ii) to indicate how much of that funding has already been transferred to Citizens Advice; (iii) to indicate when the balance will be transferred; and (iv) to outline the reasons for any delay in the allocation of any such monies. (AQW 8215/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The current 3 year debt advice contract between my Department and Citizens Advice (CA) started on 1 April 2008 and is progressing well. It currently supports 14 advisers in locations throughout Northern Ireland and recent returns to my Department confirm that there continues to be a pressing and increasing demand for their services.

For the first year ending 31 March 2009 my Department has already paid CA some £370,000. A further claim for almost £45,000 has been made, and CA submitted the necessary supporting documentation on 13 May 2009. My Department expects to make a further payment very shortly.

The first claim relating to the 2009/10 financial year has been made and is being processed. My Department expects a payment to be made during week commencing 8 June 2009. This follows a change of payment process whereby payments will in future be made directly by my Department under a more streamlined approval process.

Telephone Debt Advisory Services

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide an update on the delivery of telephone debt advisory services. (AQW 8216/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Following a public tender, under the direction of the Central Procurement Directorate, my Department has awarded the contract to provide a free to use, confidential telephone debt advice service for Northern Ireland to A4e.

A4e was successful in the competition and is presently recruiting staff with a view to having the service operational in September 2009. The service will be based in Belfast and officials are meeting A4e on a regular basis to review the project plans.

US Investment Conference

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide details of the follow up work it has undertaken in relation to the US Investment Conference held in Belfast last year. (AQO 2964/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The USNI Conference took place in May 2008. Over 150 influential business leaders and potential investors had an opportunity to see at first hand what Northern Ireland has to offer. Media coverage and editorials, in Northern Ireland and the US reflected positively on the immediate impact and the longer term goals of the conference. The advertising value equivalent of the media interest generated by the USNI Conference was independently assessed to be £2.7m. To date, Invest NI has received over 40 expressions of interest in discussing what Northern Ireland has to offer.

In order to maximise the impact, Invest NI has put in place a comprehensive follow-up campaign. During the second half of 2008-09, a series of follow up meetings have also taken place in London and Dublin.

In addition to input from senior officials within Invest NI since the conference, as part of my personal efforts, I travelled to both the East and West coasts of the US in October 2008. While there I took the opportunity to meet with potential investors and follow up with attendees of the USNI Conference. On the West coast I participated in Invest NI's 'Trade Mission to USA - 26-31 October 2008'. The companies on this mission were representative of Northern Ireland's innovative and diversified industrial base.

In December 2008 and March 2009, the First Minister Peter Robinson and deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness visited the US. During the course of their visit, the Ministers participated in a series of meetings aimed at promoting the Northern Ireland economy and securing further inward investment. In December 2008, in addition to meeting the US President, the Ministers had separate meetings with the Mayor of New York and the New York City Comptroller to discuss the investment of pension funds in projects in Northern Ireland.

Invest NI is conscious of the importance of global economic conditions and remain confident that the Northern Ireland business proposition is a highly-competitive alternative to other regions of the British Isles or Western Europe.

The growing uncertainty and global economic downturn means many companies are tightening their belts and are increasingly focused on cost containment and deferring investment decisions. Several firms in the region are, however, firmly focused on opportunities for continued growth and new projects. Recent announcements reflect US companies' belief in the competitive proposition that Northern Ireland has to offer. The Northern Ireland value proposition will continue to be promoted strongly to potential investors in all its markets.

Senior Civil Servant Bonuses

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much was paid in bonuses to senior Civil Servants in her Department in the year 2008/09. (AQW 8226/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Bonuses totalling £69,500 in respect of the 2007/08 year were paid to Senior Civil Servants in the 2008/09 financial year. Bonuses in respect of the 2008/09 year have not yet been determined or paid. It is anticipated that this information will be available in the autumn.

Note: The Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland is included in the figure.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Hollywood Design Guide

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment following the launch of the Hollywood Design Guide, whether his Department will support the design guide recently published by the lower Newtownards Residents Group. (AQW 7931/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): The Hollywood Conservation Area Design Guide, published in March 2009, constitutes Supplementary Planning Guidance for the Hollywood Conservation Area and will be taken into account by the Department as a material consideration in determining planning applications which are within, or may affect, the setting of the Conservation Area. This Design Guide is non-statutory planning guidance and such guidance is intended to supplement, elucidate and exemplify policy documents. The Design Guidance has also been prepared within the context of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan.

The East Belfast Partnership, in association with Belfast Regeneration Office and Belfast City Council, has commissioned work to draw together a Regeneration Framework for East Belfast. The Partnership Board has also been involved in the development of a Strategy entitled 'Newtownards Road 2012', and has prepared a Planning and Design Guide to assist with the regeneration of the area.

BMAP provides the planning framework for the Belfast Metropolitan Area and there is currently no mechanism for a local plan or design guide to be prepared on a statutory basis outside the Department's planning responsibilities. Although I would support and encourage a master planning approach, particularly where there are clear regeneration

objectives, it is important that any emerging regeneration based proposals or a Planning and Design Guide for the Newtownards Road are compatible with the relevant planning framework contained in BMAP.

The Newtownards Road is designated in BMAP as an Arterial Route, with the aim of improving urban design without precluding innovative or imaginative design solutions, including regeneration and renewal/community projects. Although Planning Service notes that some of the detailed guidance contained in the Planning and Design Guide, particularly in respect of building heights, is not in line with BMAP, individual planning applications, where a variation in height is proposed, will be dealt with on their merits, taking into account urban design considerations within the context of BMAP and other relevant policy. It should further be noted that there are two nodes along the Newtownards/Upper Newtownards Arterial Route where development up to 5 storeys and a gateway site where development up to 6 storeys would be permitted under the proposed guidance.

In conclusion, while the Planning and Design Guide may be a consideration in the planning process, the weight that can be attached to it will not be as great as if it had not gone through the normal statutory process.

I trust that this is of assistance.

Landfill Sites

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) how many landfill sites his Department monitors and inspects; (ii) how many complaints his Department has received in relation to all landfill sites in the last 2 years; and (iii) what action his Department has taken in relation to these complaints. (AQW 7987/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is responsible for monitoring and inspecting 76 landfills (including closed landfills). NIEA have received 633 complaints in relation to landfill over the last two years. In response, NIEA has devoted considerable time and resources in liaising with both complainant and site operator, conducting inspection visits and arranging testing of the site and its environs for noise, smell or vermin pollution. Where clear licence/permit breaches have been demonstrated to result in nuisance and/or pollution of some kind, NIEA officials have taken appropriate regulatory action, such as issuing the operator with an Enforcement Notice (with directions, in order to resolve the issue) or a Suspension Notice.

Protected Trees

Mrs Long asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on the enforcement action being pursued in respect of the alleged breach of tree preservation orders at 135 Shandon Park, Belfast. (AQW 8088/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Service had a health and condition survey undertaken of the trees on the site in March 2008. No third party photographic evidence or video footage was requested from the residents by the Department as it has its own information in relation to the removal of the trees.

The enforcement case is still under investigation and the Department is considering its options in relation to prosecution. A replanting scheme has been put in place already.

Tree Preservation Orders

Mrs Long asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to the alleged breach of the Tree Preservation Orders at 135 Shandon Park, Belfast, to advise what legal or other advice has been sought by his Department on granting permission to Planning Application Reference Z/2008/0489/F; and what assessment he has made of the impact for any enforcement action or court proceedings in granting planning permission for this application. (AQW 8089/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning application Z/2008/0489/F has not been granted planning permission. Planning Service is still processing the application and no decision has as yet been taken. Planning Service did not seek legal or other advice on the planning application and saw no reason to do so. Planning Service's view is that any decision to grant permission to the proposed housing development will have no bearing on any enforcement action envisaged in relation to the removal of the TPO trees.

Protected Trees

Mrs Long asked the Minister of the Environment what survey work had been undertaken in respect of the protected trees at 135 Shandon Park, Belfast prior to their removal. (AQW 8090/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Service had a health and condition survey undertaken of the trees on the site in March 2008. No third party photographic evidence or video footage was requested from the residents by the Department as it has its own information in relation to the removal of the trees.

The enforcement case is still under investigation and the Department is considering its options in relation to prosecution. A replanting scheme has been put in place already.

Protected Trees

Mrs Long asked the Minister of the Environment whether his Department has sought to obtain the photographs and video footage taken by residents as trees were being removed at 135 Shandon Park, Belfast in pursuance of any enforcement case or legal action in respect of the alleged breach of tree preservation orders at the site. (AQW 8091/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Service had a health and condition survey undertaken of the trees on the site in March 2008. No third party photographic evidence or video footage was requested from the residents by the Department as it has its own information in relation to the removal of the trees.

The enforcement case is still under investigation and the Department is considering its options in relation to prosecution. A replanting scheme has been put in place already.

Tree Preservation Orders

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the action being taken by his Department to enforce the Tree Preservation Order at Myrtle Lodge, Bryansford. (AQW 8109/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The matter still remains under consideration and the Department expects to finalise its decision within the next 4-6 weeks.

Illegal Dumping

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the investigation into illegal dumping at Ballyhornan Road, Downpatrick. (AQW 8110/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency is carrying out an investigation into alleged illegal dumping at a site on Ballyhornan Road, Downpatrick. The Agency is unable to provide further information at the present time, as to do so could compromise the integrity of the investigation or the rights of those under investigation.

Bonuses Paid to Permanent Secretary

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment how much was paid in bonuses to his Department's Permanent Secretary in each of the last five financial years. (AQW 8138/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Combined salary and bonus information for the Permanent Secretary of Department of Environment is currently provided through Resource Accounts in £5k bands, available from the DOE website (www.doeni.gov.uk) the specific link is:

<http://applications.doeni.gov.uk/publications/document.asp?docid=15112>

(See Page 39, which details the Permanent Secretary's salary at £110-115,000).

It is our policy not to disclose the remuneration details of individual civil servants, other than in such broad terms.

Sewage Disposal

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the environmental considerations taken into account on the impact of proposed changes to the sewage collection, treatment and disposal proposals of NI Water; and can he confirm that his Department and the Environmental Protection Agency are being fully informed of the proposals and any subsequent changes to them as they would affect the areas of Islandmagee, Ballycarry and Whitehead. (AQW 8145/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Under the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, discharges to coastal waters serving a population equivalent (p.e.) of greater than 10,000 require secondary treatment while those less than 10,000 require appropriate treatment.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is currently in discussions with Northern Ireland Water regarding the proposal to pump wastewater from Whitehead, Ballystrudder and Ballycarry for disposal at Cloughfin Bay.

The total p.e. for the proposed new discharge is less than 10,000 and therefore would require appropriate treatment.

Under this proposal, the continuous discharges from Ballycarry and Ballystrudder would be removed from Larne Lough and pumped to the new site at Cloughfin Bay for disposal. This will contribute to the protection of the designated Shellfish Water in Larne Lough.

Derry City Council Equality Consultation

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment if his Department has been contacted by Derry City Council in pursuance of an equality consultation exercise in relation to the name of the City of Londonderry and, if so, how he intends to respond to the request. (AQW 8156/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department was advised in December 2007 of the Council's intention to apply to the Privy Council to have the name of the city changed. I have not received any further correspondence since this date.

Land Zoned for Industrial Use in Downpatrick

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the land zoned for industry available in the Downpatrick area to meet the foreseeable future needs of the area. (AQW 8170/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The recently adopted Ards and Down Plan 2015 zones 19.7 hectares of land within Downpatrick. Nearly 8 hectares of land is zoned at Killough Road, and 11.8 hectares is zoned at Cloonagh Road and Brannish Road.

The Plan also proposes to safeguard designated lands in existing industrial use in Downpatrick. These areas of industrial land are located at Flying Horse Road, Brannish Road, Cloonagh Road, Killough Road and Ballydugan Road. These lands are safeguarded by Policy IND 1, in the Volume 1, Part 2 – Policy Framework of the Ards and Down Area Plan 2015.

Downpatrick also has a large, 34 hectare, serviced industrial estate on the Belfast Road with nearly 20 hectares of remaining developable land.

The previous Down Area Plan zoned 17 hectares of land for industry in Downpatrick, and 3.5 hectares are remaining.

There is therefore approximately 44 hectares of existing industrial land within or close to Downpatrick, that remains undeveloped, the majority of which is located on the Belfast to Downpatrick Link Corridor as identified within the Regional Development Strategy.

Land Zoned for Industrial Use in Downpatrick

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment for her assessment of the adequacy of the land zoned for industrial use in Downpatrick. (AQW 8171/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The recently adopted Ards and Down Area Plan 2015 aims to facilitate economic development and the creation of employment in the Plan Area. The policies and proposals in the Plan are in accordance with the guidelines in the Regional Development Strategy, with the onus on providing a generous and continuous supply of land for employment proposes.

As part of the preparatory work undertaken during the plan process, in accordance with regional planning policy statement PPS4 – Industrial Development, an assessment was carried out of previous industrial land take up patterns and economically active and employment trends.

The Ards and Down Area Plan has zoned just under 20 hectares of land for industry in Downpatrick, and also recognises the importance of safeguarding existing industrial land in settlements from competing uses.

In addition, Downpatrick also has a large, 34 hectare, serviced industrial estate on the Belfast Road with nearly 20 hectares of remaining developable land.

I therefore consider that my Department has zoned adequate land for new industry in the Downpatrick area to meet the needs of industry and business enterprise during the Plan period.

Restriction of Lead Shot Over Wetlands

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the outcome of representations made to his Department by the British Association for Shooting and Conservation and the Countryside Alliance of Ireland on the restriction of lead shot in wetland areas. (AQW 8177/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has worked closely and successfully with both organisations throughout the development and introduction of new statutory restrictions which come into force on 1 September. Associated guidance for the shooting community on the restriction of lead shot over wetlands has been prepared and published jointly by my Department and the two organisations.

Banbridge/Newry Area Plan

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the current position on the launch of the Banbridge/Newry Area Plan. (AQW 8191/09)

The Minister of the Environment: On 27 November 2008, the Department formally requested the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) to undertake an Independent Examination of objections to the Draft Banbridge / Newry & Mourne Area Plan 2015.

The PAC has now commenced the examination process with the first pre-examination meeting having been held on 11 March 2009. Stage 1 (Strategic topics) of the examination hearing is due to commence on 18 August and continue as necessary thereafter. It is anticipated that a date for the commencement of the Stage 2 (Site Specific topics) hearing will be announced at the second pre examination meeting which is due to be held on 17 June.

After the PAC has conducted the Examination it will report its findings to the Department. After considering the PAC report, the Department may then adopt the Plan in whole or in part, with or without amendment.

The timing of the Examination and the publication of the Commissions Report are matters for the Commission to determine. It is unlikely however that the PAC report will be forwarded to the Department before 2011.

Cleaner Neighbourhoods and Environment Act

Mrs Long asked the Minister of the Environment if he plans to extend the Cleaner Neighbourhoods & Environment Act to Northern Ireland or to introduce similar legislation. (AQW 8225/09)

The Minister of the Environment: In view of resource constraints and competing priorities facing my Department and the impact on Councils of the Review of Public Administration, further consideration of the Northern Ireland Clean Neighbourhoods agenda and associated new primary legislation corresponding to the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act has been deferred until 2011. This will allow my officials to concentrate on higher priority environmental issues over the coming years.

DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Civil Servants

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on the equal pay claim for Civil Servants. (AQW 7863/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I understand that NIPSA has lodged in excess of 4,500 equal pay claims with the Industrial Tribunals on behalf of female members, which are now the subject of legal processes. Departments have not yet been served with these claims but will have to respond to them in due course.

I met with representatives of the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance NIPSA on 7 May to discuss the equal pay claims in respect of female members of the NICS. The meeting provided me with the opportunity to hear at first hand the issues of concern to NIPSA and to assure them of my commitment to resolving the Civil Service equal pay issue, if possible, through a negotiated settlement and without the need for litigation. Discussions between officials in the Department of Finance and Personnel and NIPSA are ongoing in an effort to establish as clearly as possible the parameters within which a negotiated settlement might be reached so that I, in conjunction with my Ministerial colleagues in the Executive, can consider how the matter should be taken forward.

A review of Technical Grades across NI Departments is a necessary part of that process. Arrangements are well underway to conduct the review of TG staff with the aim of completing the work by the end of the summer, with the cooperation of the Trade Union and staff. A sample of between 100 and 150 of posts in the relevant grades will be examined as part of the review.

The issues relating to equal pay in the NICS are both significant and complex and, therefore, it is important that they are properly addressed. It is likely that it may yet take some time before they will be finally resolved. However, if there are unlawful inequalities in pay in the NICS, I am determined that any unlawful inequalities in pay in the NICS should be put right.

Government Vehicles

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he is taking steps to ensure that all Departments set an emissions limit when purchasing new vehicles. (AQW 7916/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Vehicles purchased by my Department within the last number of years have had to meet a set CO2 emission limit. It is envisaged that a CO2 emissions limit will continue to be a criterion in future procurement processes.

It is not the responsibility of DFP to set emissions limits for vehicles purchased by other Departments.

Departmental Consultations

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much his Department spent on (i) Public Notices for consultations in local or regional newspapers; and (ii) other forms of media for consultations, in each of the past three years. (AQW 7941/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The total expenditure for Department of Finance and Personnel over the last three years on consultation is set out in the table below.

| Description | 2006-2007 | 2007-2008 | 2008-2009 |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Local or Regional Newspapers | £5,596 | £12,506 | £2,655 |
| Other Forms of Media for Consultations | £147,921 | £114,320 | £49,327 |
| Total | £153,517 | £126,826 | £51,982 |

Civil Service

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the reasons for the delay in settling the civil service equal pay claim, and when he expects to finalise this matter. (AQW 7942/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The issues relating to equal pay in the NICS are both significant and complex and, therefore, it is important that they are properly addressed.

Discussions between officials in the Department of Finance and Personnel and NIPSA are ongoing in an effort to establish as clearly as possible the parameters within which a negotiated settlement might be reached so that I, in conjunction with my Ministerial colleagues in the Executive, can consider how the matter should be taken forward.

Cleaning Products

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans his Department has to purchase cleaning, household or toiletry products which, including their contents, have not been tested on animals. (AQW 7945/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department of Finance and Personnel only uses cleaning products supplied through the cleaning contract set up by Central Procurement Directorate (CPD).

The Department has no plans to purchase any cleaning materials outside of the current cleaning contract.

Government Vehicles

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the financial and environmental benefits in purchasing and using hybrid vehicles in the central car pool. (AQW 7955/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: My Department has two hybrid vehicles in its central car pool which were purchased in 2005. The vehicles produce lower CO2 emissions than the other vehicles in the central car pool, are quiet in operation and a substantial element of the component parts are recyclable.

The purchase price of the vehicles was higher than comparable non hybrid vehicles and the running costs are not considered to be significantly different from other cars managed and operated by the Department.

Civil Service

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many vacancies are in the Civil Service in the Derry City Council area, broken down by (i) grade; and (ii) Government Department. (AQW 7990/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of vacancies in permanent Northern Ireland Civil Service posts, located in the Council area, in each of the eleven Northern Ireland Departments and their Agencies, is set out in the attached table.

**NICS VACANCIES IN THE COUNCIL AREA, BROKEN DOWN BY GRADE AND GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT¹
FULL TIME EQUIVALENT (FTE) BASIS AT 27 MAY 2009**

| Dept | AA | AO | EO2 | EO1 | SO | DP | G7 | Other | | Total |
|------|----|-----|-----|-----|----|----|----|--------|---------------------------------------|-------|
| | | | | | | | | No. | Grade | |
| DARD | 1 | 2.5 | 2 | | | | | | | 5.5 |
| DEL | 1 | 3 | | | | | | | | 4 |
| DFP | 2 | | | | 1 | 1 | | | | 4 |
| DOE | 1 | | | 1 | | | | 1 2 | SPTO ¹ PTO ² | 5 |
| DRD | | | | | | | | 1 | Road Worker | 1 |

| Dept | AA | AO | EO2 | EO1 | SO | DP | G7 | Other | | Total |
|--------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|----|-------|-------------------|-------|
| | | | | | | | | No. | Grade | |
| DSD | 15.4 | 3.4 | 6.2 | 1.2 | 0.2 | | 2 | 2 | SGB2 ³ | 30.4 |
| Totals | 20.4 | 8.9 | 8.2 | 2.2 | 1.2 | 1 | 2 | 6 | | 49.9 |

Note: Departments not shown in the table had no vacancies.

¹ Senior Professional and Technical Officer

² Professional and Technical Officer

³ Support Grade Band 2

Divisional Veterinary Office, Larne

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel in relation to the Divisional Veterinary/DARD Office in Larne (i) how much money was spent on upgrading the office; (ii) when the last upgrade was completed; and (iii) if the building is vacated by her Department, whether her Department will have any further financial responsibilities. (AQW 8002/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The building DARD occupies is also a Jobs & Benefit office (JBO). The amount of funding that has been spent on the building, in the last five years is as follows:-

| | |
|----------|------------|
| Resource | £ 358,040 |
| Capital | £2,035,000 |

The last upgrade was completed in November 2004.

In the event that any Department decides to vacate a property then the vacating Department must meet the accommodation costs of the property until it can be re-occupied or disposed of.

Domestic Rates

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many households have experienced higher domestic rates compared to last year. (AQW 8021/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: A total of 687,407 domestic properties have been assessed for rates both this year and last year. Of these 12,504 (1.8%) had a lower rating assessment this year compared with last year and 636,578 (92.6%) had a higher rating assessment. The remaining 38,325 (5.6%) had the same assessment in both years.

Domestic Rates

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many households have experienced lower domestic rates compared to last year. (AQW 8022/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: A total of 687,407 domestic properties have been assessed for rates both this year and last year. Of these 12,504 (1.8%) had a lower rating assessment this year compared with last year and 636,578 (92.6%) had a higher rating assessment. The remaining 38,325 (5.6%) had the same assessment in both years.

Civil Service

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in relation to the Civil Service Equal Pay claim, (i) to clarify the total number of meetings he has held on this issue; (ii) to detail which groups and individuals attended these meetings; (iii) on what date they were held; and (iv) where they were held. (AQW 8029/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have held one meeting with representatives of NIPSA, which took place in Parliament Buildings on 7th May 2009 at 10.00am; senior officials of the Department of Finance and Personnel and my Special Adviser were also present at this meeting.

In addition, the matter has been, and continues to be, discussed with senior DFP officials at my weekly issues meetings.

Civil Service

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total number of correspondence he has received from members of the public regarding Civil Service back pay. (AQW 8031/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have received a number of letters and emails from members of the public in relation to the equal pay issue.

Equal Pay Claim

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if the £100 million pounds received from Treasury to facilitate a settlement in the Civil Service Equal Pay claim is still available and able to be drawn upon by his Department. (AQW 8032/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The £100m facility I secured as a result of negotiations with the Prime Minister in November 2008 is to be used to address cost pressures facing the Executive, one of which may be the equal pay issue. This facility has not yet been used.

Bonuses Paid to Permanent Secretary

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much was paid in bonuses to his Department's Permanent Secretary in each of the last five years. (AQW 8123/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Combined salary and bonus information for the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Finance and Personnel is currently provided through Resource Accounts in £5k bands, available from www.dfpni.gov.uk It is our policy not to disclose the remuneration details of individual civil servants, other than in broad terms.

Civil Registration Bill

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to answer AQW 7340/09, to detail the timeframe for this proposed legislation to become law. (AQW 8155/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Civil Registration Bill is expected to complete its passage through the Assembly legislative process later this year. Subsequent Regulations will be required to enable the unmarried father's details to be added to the birth record without the mother being present and it is anticipated that these powers will be introduced in late 2010.

Chancellor's Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline any further details on the impact on Northern Ireland of the Chancellor's recent budget. (AQW 8179/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Chancellor of the Exchequer delivered the 2009 Budget statement to Parliament on 22 April 2009.

The main implications for Northern Ireland (NI) are in relation to the NI Executive Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) with a net reduction of £6.4 million over the period 2009-11. This is a result of the additional Barnett consequential over this period being offset by the NI Executive's share of the increased efficiency savings expected of UK Departments in 2010-11.

The Budget 2009 document also sets out the latest HM Treasury projections as regards growth in UK public expenditure over the medium term. These imply that there will need to be increased emphasis by the NI Executive in achieving Value for Money over the period 2011-12 to 2013-14 in light of the more constrained public expenditure environment.

In addition, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a number of UK wide measures which will impact on NI citizens and businesses, including:

- One year increase in first-year capital allowances to 40%;
- Increase in Winter Fuel Allowance for 2009-10 of £100 for over 80's and £50 for over 60's, although the level of payment is the same as in 2008-09;
- Vehicle Scrappage scheme, co-funded with the industry, that will enable consumers to scrap vehicles older than ten years with new vehicles at a discount of £2,000
- Strategic Investment Fund to support advanced industrial projects of strategic importance with a third of the £750 million funding earmarked for low carbon projects; and
- Increase in the income tax rate to 50% for those earning £150,000 and more from 2010-11.

Senior Civil Servant Bonuses

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much was paid in bonuses to senior Civil Servants in his Department in the year 2008/09. (AQW 8198/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Information on the total amount paid in non-consolidated bonus payments to Senior Civil Servants in the Department of Finance and Personnel in respect of performance year 2008/2009 is not yet available. It is anticipated that this information will be available in the Autumn.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Health Service Contracts

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to Health Service contracts issued to the voluntary sector, (i) what the average length of contract is; and (ii) how many contracts were issued in the last three months of the financial year. (AQW 6921/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The average length of contract awarded to the voluntary sector, and the number of contracts awarded to the sector during the period January to March 2009 is indicated in the table below.

| | Ave Length of Contract | No of contracts Jan-Mar 09 |
|--------|------------------------|----------------------------|
| EHSSB | 2 years | 13 |
| WHSSB | 290 days | 14 |
| NHSSB | 1 year | 0 |
| SHSSB | 2.5 years | 0 |
| NJHSCT | 2 years | 19 |
| SEHSCT | 1 year | 29 |
| BHSCT | 1 year | 86 |
| SHSCT | 1 year | 4 |
| WHSCT | 11 months | 45 |
| NIAS | 1 year* | 0 |

* NIAS only have one contract with the voluntary sector

External Service Providers

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Health Service patients have been assessed by external service providers such as 'Medinet,' over the past two years.

(AQW 7027/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A total of 20,725 Health Service patients received a first outpatient assessment by an external service provider in 2007/08. Information on the number assessed in 2008/09 is not currently available.

Supplementing health care capacity through the use of the independent sector is intended only as a short-term measure and, along with other measures, has delivered significant improvements in waiting times. It will continue to be necessary to use the independent sector while waiting lists times are further reduced and backlogs exist, and while shortfalls in capacity are identified and addressed.

Children in Care

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what supervised contact between parents and children in care entails; (ii) the criteria for supervised contact; and (iii) what training is required for supervisors.

(AQW 7078/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) Supervised contact between parents and children in care is where contact takes place in a safe, controlled situation, overseen by appropriate staff employed by a HSC Trust, another relevant organisation or adult.
- (ii) Subject to any court order, it is for a HSC Trust to decide on the nature of any contact arrangements between a looked after child and his parent/s. In determining whether contact should be supervised, HSC Trusts consider a range of circumstances, including the child's needs, wishes and feelings, potential risks to the child, any pending court proceedings following physical, emotional or sexual abuse, the stability of the child's placement, the quality of relationship and the benefit of contact for the child. HSC Trusts are also required to take account of the proportional human rights of each of the parties. The child's welfare is the paramount consideration in any decision regarding contact.

The training and experience requirements of the individual/s supervising contact will depend on the nature of the situation and the assessed risks. Where there are serious concerns for the child's well being, for example, contact will be supervised by a qualified Social Worker. In other situations, a suitable adult can be nominated and agreed by the parties involved and endorsed by the Trust. This often involves a relative or friend known to the child and parent or a nominated member of staff within the Trust who receives on the job training.

Clostridium Difficile Outbreak

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he would consider extending the inquiry into the Clostridium difficile outbreak taking place in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area to include the Belfast City and Musgrave Park Hospitals.

(AQW 7091/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have considered requests to extend this public inquiry to other HSC Trusts, and decided not to do so.

The outbreak of C. difficile in Northern Trust hospitals was unprecedented and unparalleled in Northern Ireland in a number of respects including its scale, extent and duration, and the appearance for the first time in Northern Ireland of C. difficile ribotype 027. I advised the Assembly on 14 October 2008 that the purpose of the public inquiry would be to establish how many deaths resulted from the Clostridium difficile outbreak in Northern Trust hospitals and to examine the experiences of patients and others who were affected by that outbreak. I have no plans to change the scope of this inquiry.

I fully expect that there will be lessons to be learned from this inquiry, and all Trusts will be expected to act on these.

Paediatric Occupational Therapy

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to Paediatric Occupational Therapy posts, to detail for each Health and Social CareTrust area, (i) how many posts are community based, whole time equivalent; (ii) how many posts are filled; and (iii) how many posts are vacant.

(AQW 7366/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is given in the table below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF COMMUNITY BASED PAEDIATRIC OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY (I) POSTS, (II) POSTS FILLED AND (III) POSTS VACANT BY HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE TRUST AS AT APRIL 2009.

| HSC Trust | Community Based Paediatric Occupational Therapy posts | | Community Based Paediatric Occupational Therapy posts filled | | Community Based Paediatric Occupational Therapy posts vacant | |
|---------------|---|------------------|--|------------------|--|------------------|
| | Headcount | WTE ¹ | Headcount | WTE ¹ | Headcount | WTE ¹ |
| Belfast | 14 | 11.94 | 14 | 11.94 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Northern | 26 | 21.77 | 23 | 19.27 | 3 | 2.50 |
| South Eastern | 6 | 5.06 | 6 | 5.06 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Southern | 27 | 22.26 | 22 | 17.76 | 5 | 4.50 |
| Western | 14 | 11.67 | 14 | 11.67 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Total | 87 | 72.70 | 79 | 65.70 | 8 | 7.00 |

Source: Northern Ireland Health & Social Care Trusts

Notes:

1. WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.
2. Numbers are provided for all staff at Band 5 or above.
3. Northern Trust advised that 1 vacant post is currently being advertised and 2 posts are already in the recruitment process and will be filled shortly.
4. Southern Trust advised that 2 (1.5 WTE) vacancies have been filled with one post holder taking up post on 5th May 2009 and the second to take up post by June 2009. 3.39 WTE Band 5 posts in the Southern Trust are currently funded from non-recurrent monies.
5. Western Trust advised that their figures include 3 (3.00 WTE) Temporary Band 5 posts which are funded through reallocation of resources.

Paediatric Speech and Language Therapy

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to Paediatric Speech and Language Therapy posts, to detail for each Health and Social CareTrust area, (i) how many posts are community based, whole time equivalent; (ii) how many posts are filled; and (iii) how many posts are vacant.

(AQW 7367/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is given in the table below.

Table 1: Number of Community Based Paediatric Speech and Language Therapy (i) Posts, (ii) Posts filled and (iii) Posts Vacant by Health and Social Care Trust as at April 2009.

| HSC Trust | Community Based Paediatric Speech and Language Therapy posts | | Community Based Paediatric Speech and Language Therapy posts filled | | Community Based Paediatric Speech and Language Therapy posts vacant | |
|---------------|--|------------------|---|------------------|---|------------------|
| | Headcount | WTE ¹ | Headcount | WTE ¹ | Headcount | WTE ¹ |
| Belfast | 75 | 49.95 | 70 | 45.33 | 5 | 4.62 |
| Northern | 76 | 64.07 | 65 | 54.82 | 11 | 9.25 |
| South Eastern | 23 | 14.69 | 23 | 14.69 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Southern | 25 | 17.93 | 25 | 17.93 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Western | 33 | 21.20 | 32 | 20.40 | 1 | 0.80 |

| HSC Trust | Community Based Paediatric Speech and Language Therapy posts | | Community Based Paediatric Speech and Language Therapy posts filled | | Community Based Paediatric Speech and Language Therapy posts vacant | |
|--------------|--|------------------|---|------------------|---|------------------|
| | Headcount | WTE ¹ | Headcount | WTE ¹ | Headcount | WTE ¹ |
| Total | 232 | 167.84 | 215 | 153.17 | 17 | 14.67 |

Source: Northern Ireland Health & Social Care Trusts

Notes:

6. WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.
7. Numbers are provided for all staff at Band 5 or above.
8. Belfast Trust advised that all 5 vacancies are currently in the recruitment process and will be filled by July 2009.
9. Northern Trust advised that 6 of the vacancies will be filled shortly, 2 are being re-advertised, 2 are being re-configured in the new Trust structure and 1 vacancy is being re-configured as a lower Band post.
10. Southern Trust advised that their figures include 3.00 WTE Band 5 posts which are funded through reallocation of resources.

Paediatric Physiotherapy

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to Paediatric Physiotherapy posts, to detail for each Health and Social Care Trust area, (i) how many posts are community based, whole time equivalent; (ii) how many posts are filled; and (iii) how many posts are vacant. (AQW 7368/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is given in the table below.

Table 1: Number of Community Based Paediatric Physiotherapy (i) Posts, (ii) Posts filled and (iii) Posts Vacant by Health and Social Care Trust as at April 2009.

| HSC Trust | Community Based Paediatric Physiotherapy posts | | Community Based Paediatric Physiotherapy posts filled | | Community Based Paediatric Physiotherapy posts vacant | |
|---------------|--|------------------|---|------------------|---|------------------|
| | Headcount | WTE ¹ | Headcount | WTE ¹ | Headcount | WTE ¹ |
| Belfast | 7 | 3.67 | 7 | 3.67 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Northern | 21 | 14.28 | 17 | 11.78 | 4 | 2.50 |
| South Eastern | 14 | 11.06 | 13 | 10.66 | 1 | 0.40 |
| Southern | 20 | 14.95 | 14 | 9.44 | 6 | 5.51 |
| Western | 13 | 9.16 | 13 | 9.16 | 0 | 0.00 |
| Total | 75 | 53.12 | 64 | 44.71 | 11 | 8.41 |

Source: Northern Ireland Health & Social Care Trusts

Notes:

11. WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.
12. Numbers are provided for all staff at Band 5 or above.
13. Northern Trust advised that 1 vacancy is being scrutinised for approval to proceed with recruitment, 1 vacancy is currently being re-advertised and 2 vacancies are short-term to cover maternity leave (1 of which is to be filled internally).
14. Southern Trust advised that 2 posts will be filled shortly, 2 posts are currently in the recruitment process and 2 are being scrutinised for approval to proceed with recruitment.

Departmental Consultations

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much his Department spent on (i) Public Notices for consultations in local or regional newspapers; and (ii) other forms of media for consultations, in each of the past three years. (AQW 7972/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: (i) The amount spent by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on public notices for consultations in local and regional newspapers over the past three years is shown in the table.

| 2006/07 | 2007/08 | 2008/09 |
|------------|------------|-----------|
| £34,963.53 | £12,498.81 | £8,882.65 |

The costs were higher in 2006/07 due to bi-lingual translations under Direct Rule. The costs have reduced significantly following my decision to produce Departmental public notices in English only.

(ii) The Department also publishes public consultations on the Departmental website, the costs of which are not separately identifiable.

Accident and Emergency Units

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have presented themselves at Accident and Emergency Units because of accidents in the home, in each of the last three years, and what action is the Minister taking to reduce the number of such incidents. (AQW 7976/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The statistical information is not available in the format requested.

Approximately 7,000 patients are admitted to hospital each year in Northern Ireland as a result of accidents in the home. Efforts to reduce the number of accidents in the home are being taken forward through my Department's Home Accident Prevention Strategy published in 2004. The Strategy aims to facilitate a reduction in the number of accidental deaths and injuries in the home through partnership working with the statutory, voluntary and community sectors. Actions include the provision of training for those with a contribution to make in the promotion of safety in the home, raising public awareness of home safety issues through local education and information campaigns, home safety checks and the installation of home safety equipment.

Patient Welfare

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW/7659/09, to define the use of the term 'responsibly and reasonably' and to outline what action health and social care staff can take when they feel they have exhausted all available avenues of reporting patient welfare concerns. (AQW 8013/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Neither the Public Interest Disclosure Order (Northern Ireland) 1998 nor the Guide to the Order offer a legal definition of the words "responsibly and reasonably". However, Health and Social Care staff, are protected against victimisation under the Public Interest Disclosure (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 provided they have acted in good faith.

There are a number of options open to HSC staff if they find it is necessary to raise concerns about patient welfare. These include an approach to a relevant organisation prescribed under the Public Interest Disclosure (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. For example, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority plays a key role in the investigation of standards and quality of treatment and care.

People Diagnosed with Retinoblastoma

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have been diagnosed with Retinoblastoma, broken down by age groups (i) 0-5 years; (ii) 6-15 years; (iii) 16-21 years; (iv) 22-40 years; and (v) over 40 years of age. (AQW 8020/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of people who have been diagnosed with Retinoblastoma is not available.

Home Care Arrangements

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for the past three months, the number of patients from each Health and Social Care Trust area who have been unable to be discharged from hospital due to the unavailability of home care arrangements, and to indicate the waiting times involved. (AQW 8033/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the format requested.

Daisy Hill Hospital

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the level of funding he has committed to Daisy Hill Hospital and to outline the proposed timetable for the delivery of the committed funding. (AQW 8053/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: During the first 3 years of ISNI I have committed £5m to developments at Daisy Hill. These include additional renal dialysis services and car parking both progressing to completion. As part of the Capital Priorities Review further funding of around £50m has been identified within the ISNI to start a further phase of developments at Daisy Hill Hospital.

The Southern Trust will in due course develop proposals for the future development of Daisy Hill Hospital. Treasury Green Book guidance requires that that proposal take into account a number of factors such as location and accessibility. It is only on receipt and assessment of that proposal that I will be able to comment specifically on such aspects of the development.

No absolute guarantees can be made on funding however the estimated timeframe for construction is 2016/17 to 2017/18.

Daisy Hill Hospital

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the last two years' statistics on the cleanliness of Daisy Hill Hospital. (AQW 8055/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This information is not held centrally. However, Daisy Hill Hospital was subject to an unannounced hygiene inspection by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) earlier this year. The report and a quality improvement plan will be published later in the summer and Daisy Hill will be re-inspected at a later date to ensure that actions have been carried out.

Daisy Hill Hospital

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to replace the eight year old CT scanner at Daisy Hill Hospital. (AQW 8056/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This is a matter for the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. The Trust has advised that procurement of a new CT scanner is one of its priorities and a business case for replacement of the scanner is being developed.

Daisy Hill Hospital

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that an Ophthalmology Speciality Unit is planned for the Southern Health and Social Care Trust and if it will be located at Daisy Hill Hospital. (AQW 8058/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust and the Health and Social Care Board are discussing the commissioning and provision of an ophthalmic service for patients in the Southern Trust area. The location of this service will be determined as part of these discussions.

Daisy Hill Hospital

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the location and accessibility of Daisy Hill Hospital and what cognisance will be given to these factors in relation to the hospital's future development. (AQW 8059/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: During the first 3 years of ISNI I have committed £5m to developments at Daisy Hill. These include additional renal dialysis services and car parking both progressing to completion. As part of the Capital Priorities Review further funding of around £50m has been identified within the ISNI to start a further phase of developments at Daisy Hill Hospital.

The Southern Trust will in due course develop proposals for the future development of Daisy Hill Hospital. Treasury Green Book guidance requires that that proposal take into account a number of factors such as location and accessibility. It is only on receipt and assessment of that proposal that I will be able to comment specifically on such aspects of the development.

No absolute guarantees can be made on funding however the estimated timeframe for construction is 2016/17 to 2017/18.

People with Long-Term Conditions

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his Department's plans to support people living with long term conditions. (AQW 8092/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Over the current comprehensive spending review period, £44m has been made available to improve the range of services available for people with long term conditions. This funding is being used by the Health and Social Care Board and Trusts to develop pro-active case management arrangements and provide specialist nursing and treatment services in the community for people with long term conditions. The funding will also be used to develop patient education programmes to help more people to manage their own condition successfully.

Almost half of these resources will be used to introduce a "remote vital signs monitoring service". This service will underpin the delivery of case management and will also help patients to manage their own condition more effectively.

People with Long-Term Conditions

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, following the joint Long Term Conditions Alliance Northern Ireland and DHSSPS conference in October 2008, (i) to outline the progress made in self management of long term conditions; and (ii) for an update on the Connecting Health Home monitoring project. (AQW 8093/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: (i) 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 long term conditions in the community. A wide range of self management programmes is available. Some are professionally-led and others are delivered by patients or service users. It is a matter for the HSC Board and Trusts 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.

(ii) The design and procurement of a regional remote monitoring service for patients with long term conditions like diabetes, respiratory disease and heart failure is well advanced and is expected to become operational by early 2010. In advance of this, a number of pilots have been running in each of the 5 Trusts to improve the quality of care and to develop the experience of clinicians, patients and managers in the use of technology to effectively manage chronic conditions. By March 2009 some 1300 patients had accessed this service.

People with Long-Term Conditions

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the budget of each Health and Social Care Trust for self managing long term conditions. (AQW 8094/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and Social Care Trusts provide a wide range of services for people with long term conditions, including help for people to manage their own conditions more effectively. However, Trusts do not have a discrete budget for self managing long term conditions and the specific cost of self management cannot be disaggregated from the overall resources deployed for the care and treatment of people with long term conditions.

Eastern Health and Social Services Board

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people appointed to senior posts in the Regional Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency were not previously employed by the Eastern Health and Social Services Board. (AQW 8095/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There have been 12 appointments to senior posts in the Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency. Nine of those appointed were not from the Eastern Health and Social Services Board.

Western Health and Social Services Board

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people appointed to senior posts in the Regional Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency were previously employed by the Western Health and Social Services Board. (AQW 8096/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There have been 12 appointments to senior posts in the Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency. None of those appointed were previously employed in the former Western Health and Social Services Board.

South Tyrone Hospital

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there has been a reduction in mental health services at South Tyrone Hospital. (AQW 8098/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There has been no reduction in Mental Health Services at the South Tyrone Hospital. In fact, the Trust will be enhancing the mental health services on the South Tyrone Hospital site by the opening of a Mental Health Resource Centre offering day treatment to 16 patients per day, with additional sessions and input for patients requiring psychological therapy. The Trust expects the Centre to open over the summer of 2009.

Mental Health

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what percentage of the Health Service budget is spent on mental health, in each Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 8099/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below shows the percentage of the Health Service budget spent on Mental Health by each Health and Social Care Trust in the 2007/08 year.

| HSC Trust | % Spend |
|-------------------------|---------|
| Belfast HSC Trust | 1.6 |
| Northern HSC Trust | 1.1 |
| South Eastern HSC Trust | 0.8 |
| Southern HSC Trust | 0.8 |

| HSC Trust | % Spend |
|-------------------------------|------------|
| Western HSC Trust | 0.9 |
| Northern Ireland Total | 5.2 |

The total revenue budget for health in 2007/8 was £3,804.8m and the percentages quoted above are in relation to this.

Waterside General Hospital

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline if he has any plans to reduce the number of beds in the Waterside General Hospital. (AQW 8112/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is primarily for the Health and Social Care Board, as the commissioner of services, to prioritise and allocate resources to meet the needs of the population within each Trust area.

However, I can advise that the Western Trust is currently reviewing its inpatient care of the elderly as part of an ongoing reform and modernisation programme. That review includes service provision at Waterside Hospital and has resulted in the development of an intensive rehabilitation service and the roll out of an ortho-rehabilitation service at the Waterside Hospital.

The Trust has advised that no beds have been closed and it continues to work closely with commissioners regarding future service developments.

Efficiency Savings: DHSSPS

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the Comprehensive Spending Review efficiency savings process for his Department. (AQO 2893/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Our organisations have delivered their challenging 2008/09 efficiency target of £118m, equal to 3% of baseline funding. They should be justly proud of such an achievement.

There has been no dispensation for health and social care and therefore a total of £700m efficiencies must be achieved across the years.

In addition to the proposals for 2009/10 and 2010/11, I have made some decisions and I am working urgently with Trusts and stakeholders to make my decisions on the remainder. Difficult decisions will have to be made, but I am clear that the delivery of the best possible care for patients is at the forefront of my mind throughout this process. There will only be change if it is change for the better.

Agenda for Change

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on Agenda for Change. (AQO 2897/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am pleased to report that with the exception of around 100 jobs all HSC staff are now in receipt of Agenda for Change rates of pay and over 98% of the current staff have been paid the arrears due to them. Payroll departments are now concentrating their efforts on paying arrears due to the remaining 1% of the current staff.

85% of staff are satisfied with their Agenda for Change grading. 15% of staff have asked to have their grading reviewed; this is a fundamental part of the implementation process. HSC employers aim to have the review requests considered by review panels by the end of June 2009.

This entire process has been carried out in partnership between Health and Social Care employers and Trade Unions.

Dental Services

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, following the announcement of a contract with Oasis Dental Care, when the new dental surgeries will open . (AQO 2899/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The contract with Oasis Dental Care specifies that there will be a phased roll out of dental practices across Northern Ireland, starting with the areas of greatest need. The first new dental practices will open in Enniskillen and Londonderry and begin seeing patients before the end of this year.

Subject to any required planning permission being approved promptly, I fully expect that all of the new dentists will be in post within 12 months of the first new practice opening.

Efficiency Savings: DHSSPS

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he has held discussions with the Trade Unions about exempting his Department from the Comprehensive Spending Review efficiency savings. (AQO 2900/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The decision to impose the level of efficiencies demanded from my Department was taken by the Executive. The Trade Unions have expressed to me their belief that the Health Service should be exempt from CSR efficiency savings.

I have also indicated that I am of the belief that the service needs to reform and modernise, but not under timescales that are widely considered unreasonable given the size of the task.

Aspartame

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what investigations his Department has carried out into Aspartame, which is marketed as Nutra Sweet. (AQO 2901/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is the responsible authority for issues pertaining to food safety and use of additives. The FSA advises me that the artificial sweetener Aspartame is currently permitted to be used in food and drink in all 27 Member States of the EU.

It was first approved in the United Kingdom (UK) in 1982 by the UK's Committee on Toxicity, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT). This was later reaffirmed in 1992 by COT.

The Committee on Carcinogenicity reviewed work on Aspartame in 1996 and again in 2006 and concluded that aspartame was acceptable for use in food.

There is no current UK Government funded research into aspartame, therefore the FSA has recently asked the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) to undertake further research on this additive.

Sunbeds

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if any progress has been made in highlighting the risks of sunbed usage since the Cancer Research UK SunSmart Campaign was launched. (AQO 2902/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Research has shown that sunbeds increase the risk of skin cancer and may also cause immunosuppression and eye damage. Highlighting the risks of sunbed usage by means of a public information campaign has been a priority for the Northern Ireland Melanoma Strategy Implementation Group (NIMSIG).

At a recent conference organised by NIMSIG, experts from the UK and Europe spoke about the dangers of sunbeds to raise awareness of the adverse health effects. In addition, a subgroup of NIMSIG recently submitted their findings from an extensive sunbed survey to the Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment to inform its UK-wide report on the risks arising from sunbed use.

Sunbeds

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he is considering regulating the sunbed industry, particular in relation to sunbed usage by persons under 18 years of age. (AQO 2903/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am considering whether the sunbed industry in Northern Ireland should be regulated.

In the next few weeks the Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment, or COMARE, will publish the report of a study of sunbeds and skin cancer. This study has been commissioned jointly by my department and the other UK health departments. I will consider carefully the findings and recommendations in this report, as well as other evidence that is available.

DHSSPS Capital Budget

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions he has held with the Minister of Finance and Personnel regarding re-profiling the capital budget for his Department. (AQO 2904/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Following the Review of Capital Priorities which I commissioned last year I met with the Minister for Finance and Personnel to discuss a broad range of issues relating to the funding constraints including the capital profile which has been allocated to me and the impact this will have on delivery of the capital programme within health and social care.

Following this meeting work is continuing at official level to take this important issue forward and hopefully secure a successful outcome.

Despite these constraints, I am pressing ahead to ensure that almost £700m of capital funding is being invested during the CSR to deliver first class facilities across the service.

Mental Health and Elderly Care

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the health care provision to be made in light of the proposed cuts in mental health and elderly care in the Belfast Trust area. (AQO 2905/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: While I am still considering the Belfast efficiency proposals which affect Elderly homes, Windsor House and Victoria Day Centre, I understand that these are made in the context of above inflation service developments in a wide range of modern community based support teams, care packages and in day opportunities which will support the relevant client groups in new ways. The Trust has given an undertaking that once it identifies particular older people's statutory residential homes for closure, it will consult on the closure of specific homes.

Approval from me will only be given if the changes are in line with our strategic direction, on the basis that any transition is handled sensitively, seamlessly and in liaison with patients, their families and staff and that any new service model will meet the volume and type of demand anticipated. I am still considering the Belfast Trust proposals.

Swine Flu

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on swine 'flu'. (AQO 2906/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the Member to the information that has been published on my Department's website: www.dhsspsni.gov.uk. This information is updated frequently.

Huntington's Disease

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the provision of care for people with Huntington's disease. (AQO 2908/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: People with Huntington's Disease have access to the full range of Health and Social Care services available to all people with a disability, such as Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, Day Care, Respite, Direct Payments, Mental Health services, Nursing and Social Work.

While there are no specific services dedicated to people with Huntington's, each person with the condition is assessed as an individual first and foremost, and their needs are then addressed accordingly. This ensures that Health and Social Care Services are provided on the basis of this individually assessed need, and not on the basis of a particular named disability.

I am committed to improving services for people with a disability. For that reason I have secured £10m over the three-year Comprehensive Spending Review period for the Physical and Sensory Disability Programme of Care. Part of this funding will be used to provide an additional 200 packages of respite for people with a physical and/or sensory disability, including those with Huntington's, by 2011, benefitting around 800 people.

Public Health Agency

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the Public Health Agency. (AQO 2909/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Public Health Agency was established on 1 April 2009, bringing together a wide range of public health functions within one organization and providing a renewed, enhanced and energized focus on public health in Northern Ireland. The Agency's board-level appointments have now been completed and its board has met three times.

The Agency is taking forward a very challenging public health agenda in 2009/10 and beyond which include securing improvements in life expectancy, reducing health inequalities, tackling obesity and suicide, and reducing smoking prevalence and alcohol and drug misuse.

The Agency also has responsibility for health protection and has played a key role in leading the operational response to swine flu across Northern Ireland. This has included advising the public of the risk to health and the measures they need to take in preparation for a potential pandemic as well as ensuring robust surveillance and testing.

Swine Flu

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on swine 'flu'. (AQO 2910/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the Member to the information that has been published on my Department's website: www.dhsspsni.gov.uk. This information is updated frequently.

DEPARTMENT FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Safety Barriers

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the location of all safety barriers maintained by Roads Service in the Dunmurry and Colin areas and what criteria were used in assessing these locations. (AQW 7986/09)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Details of the location of the 37 safety fences maintained by my Department's Roads Service in the Dunmurry and Colin areas are provided in the table below.

| Road | Length (metres) | Location |
|---------------|-----------------|---|
| Dunmurry Lane | 206 | LHS* verge 300 metres before road bridge over M1 travelling towards Dunmurry. |
| Dunmurry Lane | 38.4 | LHS* verge at both approaches to parapets of bridge. |

| Road | Length (metres) | Location |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|--|
| Upper Dunmurry Lane | 116.3 | At both parapets of bridge over Creighton Road |
| Pantridge Road | 325 | LHS* 150 metres east of Pembroke Loop towards Stewartstown Road junction. |
| Pantridge Road | 325 | Approximately 200 metres from the Stewartstown Road junction LHS* for 302 metres. |
| Pembroke Loop Road | 122 | At Pembroke Loop Road, LHS*, 20 metres from junction with Colinbrook towards Pantridge Road. |
| Bellsteel Road | 261 | LHS* verge 200 metres from the junction of the Stewartstown Road for 261 metres towards Pantridge Road |
| Bellsteel Road | 94 | At LHS* and RHS+ verges adjacent to two culverts and park entrance, 500 metres before Pantridge Road entrance. |
| Colinwell Road / Colinglen Road | 333.2 | LHS* verge travelling North: 200 metres before the junction with the Colinglen Road and then Colinglen Road for a further 100 metres. |
| Colinglen Road / Colinwell Road | 663.4 | LHS* verge travelling towards Lisburn City, 50 metres before the Colinwell Road Junction and then into Colinwell Road for 600 metres. |
| Colinglen Road | 75 | LHS* approximately 100 metres beyond the entrance to Colinwell Concrete going in the direction of Lisburn. |
| Colinglen Road | 261 | LHS* approximately 1300 metres from the junction with the Colinwell Road going in the direction of Lisburn. Opposite no. 71 to opposite The Farmers Inn. |
| Colinglen Road | 40 | LHS* verge 100 metres beyond the junction with the Lagmore Road going in the direction of Lisburn. |
| Colinglen Road | 53 | LHS* going in the direction of Lisburn opposite house numbers 113 and 115. |
| Colinglen Road | 37 | LHS* verge going in the direction of Lisburn opposite the junction with the Ballycolin Road. |
| Mullaghglass Road | 40.5 | Approaching Sale's Corner opposite Castlerobin Primary School. |
| Barnfield Road, Derriaghy. | 18.5 | At parapet of bridge. |
| White Rise, White Glen, Lagmore | 48.4 | At back of footway skirting Bus Terminus. |
| White Rise, Lagmore | 15 | On footway fronting boundary fence at end of Cul-de-Sac. |
| Black's Road On-Slip | 103 | From parapet of bridge up the on-slip on the RHS+ verge to the M1. |
| Black's Road | 40.2 | LHS* of the median at the approach to the RHS+ parapet of bridge over the railway going in the direction of the junction with the Old Golf Course Road. |
| Black's Road | 40.2 | LHS* footway at the approach to bridge going in the direction of the Old Golf Course Road junction. |
| Black's Road | 15 | LHS* footway at the departure from bridge going in the direction of the Upper Lisburn Road/Kingsway junction. |
| Black's Road | 38 | At median at the approach to, and departure from bridges at junction of Old Golf Course Road and Black's Road On-slip. |
| Black's Road | 31 | In median at departure from bridge going in the direction of the Upper Lisburn Road/ Kingsway junction. |
| Old Golf Course Road | 280 | In the median of Old Golf Course Road from approx 250 metres past Creighton Road Roundabout for 280 metres going in the direction of Black's Road. |
| Cherry Road | 369 | LHS* from junction with Upper Dunmurry Lane for 369 metres. |
| Old Golf Course Road | 112.5 | At both parapets of bridge. |
| Summerhill Drive | 40 | Culvert and adjacent to entrance to Derriaghy River Walk. |
| Summerhill Road | 395 | Summerhill Road skirting the Derriaghy River walk and playing fields. |

| Road | Length (metres) | Location |
|------------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Stewartstown Road | 250.8 | LHS* footway going south, opposite junction with the Bellsteel Road. |
| Glengoland Park | 68.4 | Glengoland Park – LHS* going in the direction of Glengoland Avenue. |
| Lagmore Avenue | 246.2 | Lagmore Avenue - on both footways approx 100 metres from the junction with Lagmore Road. |
| Mounteagles Square Lagmore | 27.6 | At the top of an embankment at the rear of properties 32-40. |
| Mounteagles Crescent Lagmore | 88.6 | Opposite No's 1 to 11 – at top of embankment. |
| Mounteagles Drive Lagmore | 307.2 | At top of embankment opposite No's 35 to 71. |
| Barnfield Road, Derriaghy | 22.4 | LHS* verge going in the direction of Derriaghy opposite covered reservoir and adjacent to rear of the Mounteagles Estate, Lagmore |

* LHS = Left hand side

+RHS – Right Hand Side

In relation to the criteria used for assessing these locations, Roads Service has advised that the provision of a safety fence is assessed against the applicable standard at that time. However, the assessment generally takes account of the volume of traffic, the severity of the hazard and the road's speed limit.

Pantridge Road in Poleglass

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment his Department has made of the provision of a footpath on the Pantridge Road in Poleglass from the Stewartstown Road roundabout, to the junction of Bell Steel and Pembroke Roads. (AQW 7988/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service recently completed a pedestrian survey on this section of the Pantridge Road and recorded low pedestrian volumes. Given the scale and cost of such a scheme, the provision of a footway at this location would not compare favourably against other potential minor works schemes.

Mount Eagles and Lagmore

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment his Department has made of the provision of an alternative road into the Mount Eagles and Lagmore areas of Dunmurry from the Barnfield and Colinglen Roads. (AQW 7989/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is aware of an Article 40 agreement between the developer and the Department of the Environment's Planning Service to provide a link road connecting the Stewartstown Road and Lagmore Avenue.

It is considered that this link road, once constructed, will be adequate to meet the needs of road users in the area and it will not be necessary to consider the provision of an alternative road from the Barnfield and Colinglen Roads.

Knockmore and Sprucefield Link Road

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the plans for the Knockmore and Sprucefield Link Road including a possible timescale. (AQW 8010/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the Knockmore and Sprucefield link road has been identified as a developer led proposal. As a consultee to Planning Service, Roads Service has been engaging in pre-application discussions with the potential developer. However, as delivery of a link road is dependent on future development in the area, it is not possible to provide an accurate timescale at this time.

Strategic Development Plan for Lisburn

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development if the Roads Service has a strategic development plan for Lisburn, considering a potential John Lewis store and a major master plan for the regeneration of the city centre. (AQW 8011/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP), which will deliver an implementation programme of transport schemes to 2015, contains my Department's plans for an integrated and sustainable approach to transportation for the greater Belfast area, under the four headings of Walking and Cycling, Public Transport, Highways and Management.

The BMTP, which was subject to extensive consultation with key stakeholders including Lisburn City Council, takes into account areas of land for future development, such as land at Sprucefield. Included within the BMTP, which considers the needs of the Lisburn area, are a number of significant proposals for implementation before 2015.

However, I should explain that the BMTP can be revised within its lifetime, thereby providing the opportunity to revisit any areas of concern, raised by the masterplan, for the regeneration of Lisburn City Centre.

Ballycastle Waste Water Treatment Works

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update, indicating the timescale, on the upgrade at Ballycastle Waste Water Treatment Works. (AQW 8019/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it proposes to undertake a flow survey over the summer period to assist in establishing the level and nature of the loading on Ballycastle Wastewater Treatment Works. The results of the survey will enable final options for upgrading the Works to be developed in conjunction with the NI Environment Agency and Moyle District Council. The timescale for completing the upgrade of the Works will be prepared following the development of final options.

Bangor to Belfast Train

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the punctuality record for the Bangor to Belfast train, in the last year. (AQW 8038/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink have provided the information in the table below regarding the punctuality of the Bangor rail service. The table presents punctuality for each period plus the previous half year average for all of 2008/09 and the first two periods of 2009/10.

This information is collected by Northern Ireland Rail (NIR) as part of its internal management information system.

Similar to the Passenger's Charter monitoring exercise the performance figures exclude delays caused by security alerts, crime, extreme weather conditions and any other event that NIR could not reasonably be expected to control.

For reference the punctuality target for the Bangor line in the Passenger's Charter is that 95% of trains arrive no more than five minutes late.

| Period | From | To | Period Punctuality | 26 week Rolling Average |
|--------|----------|----------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | 31/03/08 | 27/04/08 | 95.87% | 93.16% |
| 2 | 28/04/08 | 25/05/08 | 95.37% | 94.46% |
| 3 | 26/05/08 | 29/06/08 | 95.64% | 95.13% |
| 4 | 30/06/08 | 27/07/08 | 98.54% | 95.88% |
| 5 | 28/07/08 | 24/08/08 | 94.49% | 95.91% |
| 6 | 25/08/08 | 28/09/08 | 97.56% | 96.26% |
| 7 | 29/09/08 | 26/10/08 | 89.50% | 95.30% |
| 8 | 27/10/08 | 23/11/08 | 88.64% | 94.34% |

| Period | From | To | Period Punctuality | 26 week Rolling Average |
|--------|----------|----------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| 9 | 24/11/08 | 28/12/08 | 92.74% | 93.79% |
| 10 | 29/12/08 | 25/01/09 | 97.02% | 93.54% |
| 11 | 26/01/09 | 22/02/09 | 97.42% | 94.02% |
| 12 | 23/02/09 | 29/03/09 | 98.02% | 95.66% |

Vehicles Damaged by Potholes

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of compensation claims which have been received by his Department from owners of vehicles damaged by potholes in the East Belfast constituency; and (ii) the amount of money that has been paid out, in each of the last five years. (AQW 8039/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Unfortunately, my Department's Central Claims Unit (CCU) does not hold the information in the format requested. However, CCU does maintain a record of compensation claims details for each Roads Service Section Office. The area of the Belfast East constituency covers the Belfast South and Castlereagh Section Offices. The operational area of Belfast South Section Office extends into the three constituencies of Belfast East, Belfast South and Belfast West. The operational area of Castlereagh Section Office extends into the two constituencies of Belfast East and Strangford. Claims identified solely within the Belfast East constituency boundaries could only be extracted at a disproportionate cost. The following figures show the number of compensation claims received by the owners of vehicles damaged by potholes and the amount of compensation paid out in each of the last five years for the whole of the two Section Office operational areas. This information covers the Belfast East constituency and those parts of the other constituencies which fall within the operational areas of the two Section Offices.

| | No. of Claims Received | Compensation Paid |
|------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| 2008/2009 | | |
| Belfast South Section Office | 48 | £1,725.35 |
| Castlereagh Section Office | 14 | £83.14 |
| Total | 62 | £1,808.49 |
| 2007/2008 | | |
| Belfast South Section Office | 18 | £673.60 |
| Castlereagh Section Office | 10 | £894.18 |
| Total | 28 | £1,567.78 |
| 2006/2007 | | |
| Belfast South Section Office | 36 | £437.76 |
| Castlereagh Section Office | 13 | £479.99 |
| Total | 49 | £917.75 |
| 2005/2006 | | |
| Belfast South Section Office | 11 | £189.41 |
| Castlereagh Section Office | 7 | £749.61 |
| Total | 18 | £939.02 |
| 2004/2005 | | |
| Belfast South Section Office | 19 | £2,641.13 |

| | No. of Claims Received | Compensation Paid |
|----------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| Castlereagh Section Office | 14 | £3,513.62 |
| Total | 33 | £6,154.75 |

Road Closure at Joymount, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development what assistance and compensation is available for those businesses affected by the current road closure at Joymount, Carrickfergus. (AQW 8046/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it is a general principle that there is no entitlement to compensation for disruption or loss of business as a result of a road closure.

The work at Joymount, Carrickfergus is part of a £2.5 million combined contract between NIW and Rivers Agency which aims to minimise the risk of surface flooding in the area and to reduce discharges to the sea. NIW is aware of the effect of the works on local businesses but regrettably some disruption and inconvenience is unavoidable with large scale schemes of this nature. NIW will continue to consult with the local community about progress of the works and its contractors will be taking all practicable steps to reopen the road as quickly as possible.

Pedestrian Crossing Facility in Main Street, Glenavy

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress his Department has made to provide a pedestrian crossing facility in Main Street, Glenavy. (AQW 8080/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: As outlined in my response to the Member's question on this issue in February 2008 (AQW 4078/08), the results of a previous survey fell well below that required for the provision of a pelican crossing at Main Street, Glenavy, and there were, therefore, no plans to provide such a crossing.

However, given the time that has elapsed since the last survey was carried out, I have asked my Department's Roads Service to re-survey the location. As traffic and pedestrian flows are generally lighter over the summer months, this survey will be scheduled for September 2009, and Mr Tom McCourt, Divisional Roads Manager for Eastern Division, will write to you when the results have been analysed.

Fly-Posting

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of prosecutions for fly-posting; (ii) if the prosecutions related to (a) voluntary; or (b) commercial organisations, broken down by council areas, in each of the last three years. (AQW 8108/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has not carried out any prosecutions relating to flyposting within the last three years.

I can advise the Member that, although District Councils have the power to remove flyposting, the ultimate responsibility for the regulation and enforcement of flyposting rests with the Department of the Environment's Planning Service.

Resurfacing of Springfield Road Portavogie

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) if he is aware that the Springfield Road, through Portavogie, is in need of repair; (ii) can he confirm that his Department is aware of the problem; and (iii) will he ensure that repairs take place urgently. (AQW 8132/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can confirm that I was not aware of the current condition of Springfield Road, Portavogie, however, my Department's Roads Service has advised that this road would benefit from resurfacing.

Northern Ireland Water has given notice of impending future works on this road and you will appreciate that Roads Service wishes to avoid a situation where a newly surfaced road is subject to excavation and reinstatement within a relatively short time. Consequently, there are no plans for major resurfacing in the immediate future.

The road will, however, continue to be inspected under Roads Service's cyclic regime and any actionable defects noted for repair in line with maintenance guidelines. If there are any more significant areas of deterioration, they will be addressed by way of more extensive interim repairs as appropriate.

Sewage Disposal

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) to outline the proposals for sewage disposal for Ballystrudder, Whitehead and Ballycarry; (ii) if the level of treatment proposed reflects the required European Union standards; (iii) has he taken into account the extra loading that tourism development plans for the Gobbins area of Islandmagee will generate; and (iv) will the level of treatment be adequate given the increase in house building in this part of East Antrim. (AQW 8146/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it proposes to combine wastewater flows from Ballystrudder, Whitehead and Ballycarry and screen the flow before pumping to a marine outfall at Cloughfin Bay. This proposal will improve water quality in Larne and Belfast Loughs and the Irish Sea by removing the Ballystrudder and Ballycarry wastewater discharges from Larne Lough and Whitehead's unscreened discharge from the mouth of Belfast Lough. The level of treatment proposed is in line with European Union standards.

In developing its plans, NIW has taken into account any additional loading that may be generated by the proposed tourist development plans for the Gobbins area and projected population growth in the East Antrim area to 2030.

Accessible Transport Strategy

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development when funding will be available for the pilot audio visual information on buses, in line with the Accessible Transport Strategy. (AQW 8159/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: As I said in my answer to AQW 7881/09, my Department has now received proposals for an audio-visual pilot on buses which are being considered. The funding of any pilot will be dependent on the outcome of those considerations and availability of resources, including in light of other priorities, at that time. The Accessible Transport Strategy does not contain a commitment to run a pilot.

Audio-Visual System on Buses

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department found the mislaid funding application for the Audio-Visual System on buses. (AQW 8163/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: As I said in my answer to AQW 7881/09, no application to fund an audio-visual pilot on buses has been mislaid.

Bonuses Paid to Permanent Secretary

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development how much was paid in bonuses to the Department's Permanent Secretary, in each of the last five years. (AQW 8183/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Combined salary and bonus information for DRD's Permanent Secretary, shown in bandings of £5,000, is currently provided through the Department's published Resource Accounts, available on the DRD internet site www.drdni.gov.uk. In line with its responsibilities under the Data Protection Act, it is the Department's policy not to disclose, other than in broad terms, the remuneration details of individual civil servants.

Bonuses Paid to Senior Civil Servants

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development how much was paid in bonuses to senior Civil Servants in his Department in the year 2008/09. (AQW 8185/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Information on the total amount paid in non-consolidated bonus payments to senior Civil Servants in DRD in respect of the performance year 2008/09 is not yet available. It is anticipated that this information will be available in the autumn.

Water Charges

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment he has made of the cost of deferring domestic water charging after 2010. (AQO 2912/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I answered a similar question from the Member's party colleague Tom Elliott at oral questions in April this year.

While I have made my views on the subject of deferral known, the Executive has not yet made a decision about funding of water and sewerage services in 2010/11 and beyond.

Based on current estimates a decision to defer additional household payments could cost NI DEL in the region of £1 billion over the period 2010 – 2013.

Queen's University Belfast: Parking

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of parking provision for the proposed Queen's University Belfast, Elms development. (AQO 2914/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, as a consultee of the Planning Service, it has been assessing a planning application for the proposed Queen's University Belfast Elms development.

Roads Service responded to Planning Service on 9 March 2009, identifying some concerns about the proposed car parking provision for this development. Roads Service asked that the applicant should submit further information, to demonstrate how parking for the development would be accommodated.

When the requested information becomes available, Roads Service will be in a position to advise Planning Service of any potential impact the proposed parking arrangements may have on road safety and traffic progression in the vicinity of the proposed development.

Planning Service will then need to consider the potential impact, that any parking shortfall may have, on the amenity enjoyed by existing residents in nearby streets.

Water Charges

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the operational structures put in place for domestic water charging following the decision to defer charges. (AQO 2919/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Following the Executive's unanimous decision, last November, to defer household water and sewerage payments for 2009/10, NIW has continued to maintain the capacity to implement domestic billing in accordance with existing arrangements.

My Department has also been working with the company and DFP to investigate the combined billing proposal recommended by the Independent Water Review Panel.

The Executive has not taken decisions beyond 2009/10. Should it decide on further deferral, we will have to consider the implications.

Northern Ireland Water: Chief Executive

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made in appointing a new Chief Executive to Northern Ireland Water, and when he expects the person to be in post. (AQO 2920/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that on 12 March this year it announced that Laurence MacKenzie, who is currently an executive director of the Viridian Group, has been appointed Chief Executive of Northern Ireland Water with effect from 27 July 2009.

Rural Roads

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the shortfall in funding for the maintenance of rural roads, and his Department's plans to secure the necessary funding from the Executive to improve the condition of rural roads. (AQO 2924/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: Firstly, I should explain that the rural road network accounts for around 80% of the overall network length.

My Department's Roads Service has advised that some £108 million per annum, based on 2009 prices, is needed to maintain the structural integrity of the entire road network at good practice resurfacing frequencies. The structural maintenance budget for financial year 2009/10 is currently estimated at £72 million, leaving a shortfall of £36 million.

In relation to the second part of your question, I can assure you that my Department will continue to make strong bids for additional structural maintenance funds. In the meantime, the Department's Roads Service will continue to make the best use of resources available to it, to develop and maintain the road network.

McKinstry Road/Lisburn North Feeder Road Junction

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development how much the new traffic light junction at McKinstry Road and Lisburn North Feeder Road is costing, and how much private investment is included in this project. (AQO 2925/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the current work at the junction of Wilmar Road and McKinstry Road is expected to cost around £620,000. This cost will include land acquisition, alterations to utility company services and construction work.

While the current work is being funded entirely by Roads Service, it fulfils a commitment, given by Roads Service in June 2004, to provide these improvements, in response to an £8 million investment by the private sector to construct the North Lisburn Feeder Road.

Narrow Water Bridge

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions he has had with Louth County Council on the proposed bridge at Narrow Water. (AQO 2926/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: As the member will be aware, Louth County Council, funded by the Irish Government, is responsible for assessing, designing and taking forward the Narrow Water Bridge project. I understand that they have appointed consultants to carry out a study into this project and this work is ongoing. Some public presentations have been made, in relation to this study, with further work currently underway.

I am fully supportive of the Narrow Water Bridge project, and can advise that when my Department's Roads Service has been asked for information or assistance, with regard to this scheme, it has also been provided and will continue to be the case.

Roads Service and Louth County Council have agreed that they will share information from the technical studies, on the Narrow Water Bridge project and the Newry Southern Relief Road scheme, when they have been completed.

Road Maintenance

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development how much money he plans to spend on road maintenance in the next financial year. (AQO 2927/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The outcome of the Budget 2008-11 means that funding for my Department's Roads Service's structural maintenance will be £71.8 million in 2009/10, and £70.4 million in 2010/11. In the three years to end of March 2011, over £200 million will have been invested in structural maintenance.

Regional Development Strategy

Mr Molloy asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the review of the Regional Development Strategy. (AQO 2928/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I met with Ministerial colleagues in an Executive Sub Group on 26 March. I also attended a meeting of External Stakeholders at the end of April and in May officials met with the Regional Development Committee. In addition an Inter-Departmental meeting of senior civil servants met on 14 May to provide input and advice. My officials are working on a revised document taking account of comments and discussions.

My intention is to seek Executive clearance on a revised RDS document to issue for public consultation.

NSL Ltd

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the background and circumstances surrounding the industrial relations dispute involving NSL Ltd and traffic attendants contracted by his Department. (AQO 2929/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: NSL Services Group (NSL) is a private company, contracted to my Department to provide parking enforcement and car park management services. As with all private companies, contracted to a government Department, industrial relations are an internal matter for the company itself.

However, I understand that a number of traffic attendants, employed by NSL, took unofficial strike action on 3 April 2009. As a result of this action, NSL management took the decision to dismiss 25 employees on the 18 April 2009.

My Department's Roads Service has advised that NSL is in the process of recruiting new attendants to fill the vacant posts.

DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Departmental Consultations

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Social Development how much her Department spent on (i) Public Notices for consultations in local or regional newspapers; and (ii) other forms of media for consultations, in each of the past three years. (AQW 7973/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The following amounts were spent on consultations in the last three years:

| | 2006/07 | 2007/08 | 2008/09 |
|--------------------|------------|---------|-----------|
| (i) Public Notices | £8747.05 | NIL | £9,349.20 |
| (ii) Printing | £23,098.08 | NIL | £2,604.91 |

Regeneration in Larne

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to outline how plans for regeneration in Larne will be affected by her proposals to relocate public sector posts away from Larne, which has among the lowest number of public sector posts per constituency. (AQW 8000/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Any regeneration plans supported by the Larne Masterplan are not affected by my proposals to modernise and safeguard services for customers across the local office network of the Social Security Agency.

The proposals set out in the Strategic Business Review EQIA document are currently subject to an ongoing public consultation process which runs until 17 June 2009. I have made it clear previously that I will not make any final decisions until all the consultation responses have been considered.

I have also made it clear that the recommendations from the Bain Review on the Location of Public Sector Jobs, the Review of Public Administration plans and the Regional Development and Rural Development Strategies will also be used to inform final decisions on the proposals.

There will be a public consultation on the regeneration proposals for Larne contained in the masterplan currently being prepared by the Department. That consultation will take place in the early autumn.

Social Housing

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development what progress is being made on two schemes that would enable social housing to be built in Monkstown. (AQW 8001/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Two sites within the Monkstown Estate have been identified for inclusion on the Social Housing Development Programme. Potentially, these could deliver a total of 40 units in an area where housing need has increased dramatically. Detailed proposals have been agreed by local representatives and form the basis of a planning application currently being considered by Planning Service.

Social Housing

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development in respect of the Dungannon South Tyrone Borough Council area (i) the number of homeless people; (ii) the number of people on Housing Executive waiting lists; and (iii) how many social housing applicants are in housing stress, in the Dungannon South Tyrone Borough Council area. (AQW 8028/09)

The Minister for Social Development: During 2008/09, 224 homeless applicants were awarded Full Duty Applicant status in the Dungannon South Tyrone Borough Council area. As at March 2009, there were 915 applicants on the waiting list for the Borough, 594 of these were in the housing stress category.

Social Housing

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development whether and how the need for social housing is being met in the Dungannon South Tyrone Borough Council area. (AQW 8030/09)

The Minister for Social Development: During 2008/09, 72 new social homes were completed for social housing in the Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council area.

Details regarding the programme of activities, including the need for new social housing for 2009/10 will be addressed in the District Housing plan due to be presented to the Council on 29 June 2009.

Financial Position of Carers

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the financial position of carers during the economic crisis. (AQO 2907/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Carers are an extremely diverse group of people and the financial support needs of carers vary hugely. Many carers combine their caring role with work, while others are full-time carers. Carer's allowance, as the main benefit available to carers, was designed primarily to provide a measure of financial support for a person who has given up the opportunity of full-time work to care for a severely disabled person. However, a carer can work and earn up to £95 per week and still receive carer's allowance. This not only gives the carer the opportunity of greater financial independence, but also allows a break from the often arduous caring role and helps carers to retain contact with the employment field.

Carer's allowance is not the only benefit available to carers; depending on individual circumstances, they have access to the full range of social security benefits, including income-related benefits such as income support and housing benefit which are paid at higher rates for carers. Carers' needs are not always financial and they have access to a wide range of support services from their local Health and Social Care Trusts. Such services provide practical support to carers to help them in their caring role.

Bonuses Paid to Permanent Secretary

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development how much was paid in bonuses to her Department's Permanent Secretary in each of the last five financial years. (AQW 8135/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Combined salary and bonus information for the Permanent Secretary of the Department for Social Development is currently provided through Resource Accounts in £5k bands, for the financial years between 2004 and 2008, available from http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/publications/annual_reports/publications-dsd_resource_account_reports.htm. The resource accounts for the 2008-09 year are not yet available. It is our policy not to disclose the remuneration details of individual civil servants, other than in broad terms.

Employment and Support Allowance

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development would she consider using email to send and receive applications for Employment and Support Allowance to help expedite the process. (AQW 8211/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The application form for Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) is a detailed document that requires the applicant to provide personal information about their health, their immediate family and their finances, including details of their bank / building society.

The transfer of personal information between government systems, using e-mail, is secure but the same level of assurance cannot be provided to information that is not transferred using the secure government gateway. The protection available from the gateway is not available to personal e-mail accounts. In addition, it is not possible to authenticate an application using an e-mail address.

The Agency has provided an application form on-line which applicants can download, complete and forward to the ESA Centre if they do not want to use the freephone ESA claim line.

Employment and Support Allowance

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications for Employment and Support Allowance were delayed due to the Easter Holidays and when the backlog will be cleared. (AQW 8213/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information you have asked for is not available in the format you have requested. It is not possible to forecast when claims received at a particular period in time will be completed as some claims are more complex than others. However, the average clearance time during April and May for an Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claim was 22.8 days.

To ensure that there are sufficient resources to handle the high level of interest in the new benefit, the Social Security Agency has increased the staffing levels in the ESA Centre from 155 in January to 200 at the end of May. A further 60 staff are due to join towards the end of June. As with any change of this magnitude it takes time for staff to become fully efficient on the systems and benefit rules but the excellent progress to date has been down to the hard work and commitment of staff.

Employment and Support Allowance

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how many applications were made through the Newtownards Social Security Office for Employment and Support Allowance in April 2009; (ii) how long will it take to process all of these applications; and (iii) what is the average length of time taken to process an application. (AQW 8214/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is not available by benefit office location. The table below provides details of the number of fresh claims received each month since the benefit was introduced on 27 October 2008. It is not possible to predict how long it will take to process claims received from a specific location. The average clearance time for a claim to Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) to be processed was 22.8 days at the end of May.

| Month | Number of claims |
|--------------|------------------|
| October | 56 |
| November | 940 |
| December | 1729 |
| January | 2435 |
| February | 2993 |
| March | 3313 |
| April | 2894 |
| May | 3267 |
| Total | 17,627 |

Housing: Autism

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her Department's involvement in adapting houses for families where autistic children and young people exhibit challenging behaviour. (AQO 2932/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive and each Housing Association are responsible for arranging this sort of adaptation work on their own properties, providing they are recommended by an Occupational Therapist acting for a Health and Social Care Trust.

I recently met with Caroline Brogue, co-ordinator for the NI National Autistic Society and during that meeting she raised concerns about recent problems experienced by families in the Western Trust Area.

It is clear that there needs to be very good communication between health and housing professionals to identify, assess and deliver these sorts of adaptations.

Although a Service Level Agreement is already in place to ensure timely delivery of these adaptations, I have undertaken to keep this under review and my officials are already investigating all of the related issues.

Shared Future: US Visit

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Social Development what message she brought to the Irish American political community in relation to a shared future in Northern Ireland, in her recent visit to the United States. (AQO 2933/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The objectives of the visit were to raise awareness of, and garner support for, my work in taking forward the Shared Future agenda across my Department. I went to establish, and to renew, a number of important relationships relevant to my portfolio with the new Administration, more widely at federal, state and city levels and to identify areas of mutual interest and exchangeable experience. This has the potential to forge stronger, practical relations between the Department and important US Government and other stakeholders.

My key messages were about both our achievements and our challenges. I explained how we have achieved a political settlement that has replaced conflict and violence with democratic political debate. I also explained that we continue to face huge challenges with particular regard to the continuation of segregated housing. I outlined my commitment to achieving a Shared Future and talked of the risk for our future if we do not address our segregated living. I said that I, as the Minister responsible for housing, had a particular interest and wanted to explore what successes had been achieved in the United States in tackling segregated living.

I was pleased that a number of opportunities to develop relationships, cooperation and information exchange between DSD and key organisations in the areas visited emerged as a result of the visit.

In New York, Speaker Quinn and Mayor Bloomberg's Office offered access to their experience and resources on housing.

Over the summer months I want to further explore how we might progress my shared housing agenda through discussions with residents and communities here. I will be sharing with them the experiences I brought back from the United States.

Overall my message on this trip to Americans, whether at community level or in the White House, was please don't think the Northern Ireland problem is solved. The healing process has only really begun and we need you to stay with us for the long haul.

Housing Executive Replacement Grants

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Social Development what action she is taking to ensure that all persons who already have been means tested for replacement grant assistance will receive approval for commencement of the work without undue delay. (AQO 2937/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I have ensured that grant applications, where formal approval has been issued, will continue to be funded and that the Disabled Facilities Grants scheme and mandatory Repairs Grants will also continue to operate normally. I have great sympathy for people who find themselves waiting for a grant to come through.

However, the fact is that the level of funding available for grants in the private sector has had to be curtailed. With the collapse in receipts from house and land sales the Housing Executive simply does not have the funds to do everything it had planned to do. With the money available, the Housing Executive expect to issue 2,000 grant approvals this year. In the absence of more funding, this reduction is unavoidable. Applications for discretionary grants, including Renovation Grants, Replacement Grants and Home Repairs Assistance will therefore only be approved in exceptional circumstances.

My priority is to protect the most vulnerable in our society through the provision of new social housing within the Social Housing Development Programme. I have also ensured that the funding for Warm Homes – to deliver households from fuel poverty, and funds to support people to live independently, will be protected too.

Social Housing

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development what steps she is taking to ensure that the resources available for newbuild social housing deliver as many houses as possible. (AQO 2938/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I have made the increased supply of housing my first and foremost priority. Despite the very real problems created by an anticipated £200m shortfall in the housing budget this year and next, I am pleased to report that our newbuild programme this year will be protected to make sure that those waiting for a new home do not wait any longer than is absolutely necessary.

I have made £155m available this year which will deliver 1750 new homes. Our new Procurement Strategy will ensure that this housing is delivered in the most efficient way possible and over the lifetime of the strategy, I expect to see real savings that will help us in effect deliver more for less. The same applies to my policy of building an increasing proportion of social newbuild on land we already own.

I have also reduced the levels of grant payable to Housing Associations, in effect requiring housing associations to introduce greater levels of private finance allowing our scarce resources to stretch even further.

Household Fuel Payments

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the administration of the Household Fuel Payment. (AQO 2939/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I am delighted to report that to date, about 167,000 Household Fuel Payments have been issued. The Household Fuel Payment has been a tremendous success and my officials have received many calls and letters from householders expressing their appreciation.

While my officials have not formally recorded all calls, letters and emails relating to the Household Fuel Payment, we estimate that approximately 4,000 letters and emails and in excess of 10,000 calls have been received seeking clarification of entitlement to a payment.

My officials will continue to respond, either by making a payment or providing an explanation as to why there is no entitlement. Those who believe they qualify for the Household Fuel Payment have until 30 June to write to the Department setting out the reasons why they believe they qualify.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to everyone involved in the administration of the Household Fuel Payments and in particular my own officials, counterparts in Department for Work and Pensions, EDS and Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, whose involvement ensured that payments were made accurately and securely.

Housing Budget

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of the £100 million shortfall in the housing budget, to outline what action she is taking to put housing on a firm financial footing. (AQO 2940/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I have decided my priority is to protect the provision of new social housing within the Social Housing Development Programme. As the University of Ulster pointed out yesterday, current market conditions are more suited than ever before to increase investment in social housing, to stimulate the economy, protect jobs in the overall construction industry and help the most vulnerable in this society by providing them with a home. In a falling market the circumstances exist to secure excellent value for money in social newbuild. Sites are costing less (housing associations had been priced out of the market in many instances prior to the correction) and construction work is increasingly keenly priced.

A new Procurement Strategy became operative in April 2009. Collaborative procurement will provide the conditions for integrating resources, improving consistency and continuity and obtaining better value for money. One of the overall goals of the strategy is to procure the Social Housing Development Programme on a value for money basis and in accordance with best practice. This should enable more houses to be built for the same amount of funding.

But the fundamental point is that housing must be put on a firm financial footing. We cannot plan a housing investment programme around scraps from the table in quarterly monitoring rounds.

I will nonetheless continue to make bids for additional funding in future monitoring rounds this year and to lobby my Executive colleagues for their support for my proposals for funding for the Social Housing Development Programme and Housing Executive capital programmes.

Social Housing: Killyleagh

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development when social housing at Church Hill, Killyleagh, will commence and to provide a timescale for its completion; and to confirm whether this matter will be given priority given the waiting list for social housing in this area. (AQO 2941/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The proposed scheme at Church Hill, Killyleagh falls within the category of Design and Build Packages. This is a negotiated contract for the provision of new social housing whereby the developer, who owns the land, would also build the houses. However, Developing European Union case law has called into question the use of negotiated Design and Build Packages throughout the European Union. Recent legal advice indicates that the negotiated Design and Build approach for delivering the social housing newbuild programme could run contrary to current EU procurement law. I am therefore unable to advise when this scheme will commence or provide a timescale for its completion.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is replacing negotiated Design and Build Packages with alternative newbuild schemes.

Housing: Voluntary and Community Sector

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the development of a legislative framework, in relation to housing, governing the relationship between government and the voluntary and community sector. (AQO 2942/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I have no plans to develop a legislative framework governing the relationship between Government and the voluntary and community sector and instead will develop a new non-statutory concordat. This route will allow me to progress the issue more quickly. In terms of housing in particular, my Department has statutory responsibility to regulate registered social housing landlords. I am seeking new powers in the Housing (Amendment) Bill which I introduced today to enable my Department to undertake this function more effectively.

Shared Future: Housing

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development how she proposes to take forward her Shared Future agenda in housing. (AQO 2943/09)

The Minister for Social Development: In the coming weeks I plan to announce details of the next phase in our Shared Neighbourhood Programme which we deliver in partnership with the International Fund for Ireland.

This next phase will see a further 10 existing estates identified as Shared Neighbourhoods where the community themselves have come forward and asked for our support to help them make this transition.

I will also be launching more Shared Future developments in the coming months in Sion Mills and Banbridge.

This follows on from the recent launch of 'Causeway Meadow' in Lisburn which to date is our second shared future development developed here in the North. In time I want these Shared Future developments to become the norm, rather than the exception and I am very encouraged that more and more people are now telling me this is how they want to live - together, not apart.

Village Urban Renewal Area

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Social Development whether it is appropriate to force home owners located in the vesting area of the Greater Village Urban Renewal Area, to enter into negative equity through the Advanced Purchase scheme, in the current financial climate. (AQO 2944/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Advance Purchase scheme currently being offered to residents in the Village area is entirely voluntary and no home owners are being forced to apply for it.

The values paid for any housing acquired in this manner will of course be subject to market conditions and valuations available now may increase or decrease in the coming months. Homeowners in the affected area should take their own independent advice on when, if at all, they apply for Advance Purchase.

Child Maintenance

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Social Development what assessment she has made of the impact of the current economic downturn on child maintenance payments. (AQO 2945/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The economic downturn has had a noticeable impact on Child Maintenance clients. The number of Non Resident Parents in receipt of benefit has increased by over 1000 between April 2008 and April 2009, a 10% uplift over 12 months. As Non Resident Parents see their incomes reduce as a result of job losses and short-time working, the collection of regular maintenance and arrears from them becomes more challenging. The Division is already seeing workload increases in the handling of reported changes and reassessments of maintenance liabilities.

However, despite these difficult economic conditions the annual amount of regular maintenance and arrears collected or arranged has steadily improved with a record £22.8 million collected for the year ended March 2009. This is a substantial increase on the £19.7 million collected in 2007/08. The number of children benefiting from child maintenance has also increased over the last year to 20,820 at the end of March 2009. This is an increase of almost 1600 more children when compared to March 2008. More money is now going to more children, and this despite increased numbers of Non Resident Parents being in receipt of benefit, and so having reduced ability to pay. This can be attributed to the focus on debt enforcement by the Division, including tougher strategies to recover debt and a high profile media campaign. The targeting by the Division of those Non Resident Parents who do not pay the full amount of child maintenance at the right time has helped to minimise the impact of the economic downturn on payments to Parents with Care.

That said, I am not complacent and continue to be committed to getting money to the children who are entitled to it. The unwillingness, indeed refusal, of some Non-Resident Parents to take financial responsibility for their children remains one of the biggest obstacles to progress in securing money for children and I intend to take firm action at the earliest opportunity against those parents who do not pay their child maintenance.

Housing Budget

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Social Development what steps she is taking to make the most effective and efficient use of public money in relation to housing investment and provision. (AQO 2946/09)

The Minister for Social Development: When I launched the New Housing Agenda last year, I recognised that we had to be creative and innovative in our use of scarce resources if we were to deliver the increased supply of housing that I have made my first and foremost priority.

I launched our new Procurement Strategy that will deliver savings of 10% in the procurement of our Social Housing Development Programme over these next five years. I have also reduced the level of grant payable for new housing, in effect requiring a greater private contribution than ever before; for example, since Autumn 2007 the average grant paid on new social homes has fallen by nearly £30k per unit.

I have also brought forward the construction of more new homes on land already in our ownership. These homes can be delivered much more efficiently than those where we first have to buy the land. I have also sought to acquire value for money sites such as the former Military Housing in Pond Park, Lisburn, where we can negotiate a package to acquire these homes then reduce our subsidy further by offering them on a competitive basis amongst interested Housing Associations.

Each of these actions is helping us in effect deliver more for less.

Social Housing

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister for Social Development what proposals she has brought forward to her Executive colleagues in relation to social housing to help counter the effects of the economic downturn.

(AQO 2947/09)

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.

Employment and Support Allowance

Mr Neeson asked the Minister for Social Development what action is being taken to hasten claims made for the Employment and Support Allowance. (AQO 2948/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The introduction of Employment and Support Allowance is the most significant change in the benefit system in years. Its implementation has been a success, given the complexities involved in introducing a new benefit alongside new technology and the fact that it has coincided with the economic downturn. The success is due to the hard work and commitment of the staff and management of the Centre.

The Centre continues to increase the number of claims that are being processed as the staff gain experience in the benefit and become more familiar with the new systems. The number of claims assessed between February and April increased by 48% on the number processed during the previous three month period, November 2008 to January 2009.

To further support the implementation of the new benefit, additional resources continue to be recruited and trained. The number of staff in post has increased from 155 in January to the current level of 200 with further plans in place to recruit a further 60 staff in June. This continued investment should ensure that the Centre continues to improve performance across all areas.

Child Maintenance

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister for Social Development for an assessment of the impact of her recent departmental initiatives to get more parents without care to contribute to the up-keep and maintenance of their children. (AQO 2949/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I am delighted to be able to report that the benefits realised through recent Departmental initiatives have made a very real and positive difference for children. The number of children benefiting from child maintenance has significantly increased to 20,820 at the end of March 2009, an increase of almost 1600 more children benefiting when compared to last year. The annual amount of regular maintenance and arrears collected or arranged has steadily improved with a record £22.8 million collected for the year ended March 2009. That good progress continues with a further £2.05 million collected/arranged in the month of April 2009, benefiting 21,123 children.

I want to ensure that many more children receive the money that is due to them. However, one of the biggest obstacles to progress in securing money for children remains the unwillingness, indeed refusal, of some Non-Resident Parents to take financial responsibility for their children and I intend to take firm action at the earliest opportunity against those parents who do not pay their child maintenance.

Housing Executive Maintenance Projects

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Social Development why maintenance work on Housing Executive projects, such as the Dales in Seymour Hill, Lisburn, has been cut, given the health and safety implications for the occupants. (AQO 2950/09)

The Minister for Social Development: Due to the downturn in land and house sales, there is a £100 million shortfall in the Housing Budget for 2009/10 which will impact on all spending programmes. I have decided my priority is the provision of new social housing within the Social Housing Development Programme because the current market conditions are more suited than ever before to increase investment in social housing, to stimulate the economy, protect jobs in the overall construction industry and help the most vulnerable in this society by providing them with a home. This means that improvement schemes planned in Housing Executive estates which have not already started have had to be deferred and this has affected the proposals for The Dales. However, the Housing Executive routine maintenance service is unaffected and they will also develop a programme of works to address the health and safety items which were in programmes they had hoped to deliver. The Housing Executive anticipates that this work will commence later this year.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Statue of Lord Craigavon in Parliament Buildings

Mr Dallat asked the Assembly Commission to detail the cost of providing security for the statue of Lord Craigavon in Parliament Buildings for the period 1998 to date. (AQW 8187/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Neeson): There is no specific attributable cost in providing security for the statue of Lord Craigavon as there are no staff specifically assigned to this duty.

All doorkeepers on duty in the Great Hall and around the first floor balconies are there primarily to ensure that NI Assembly business is able to proceed uninterrupted and that good order is maintained at all times. Doorkeepers in these areas will also ensure that all visitors adhere to regulations around access to Parliament Buildings and will also direct them to the various functions or events that they are attending.

Revised Written Answers

This section contains revised written answers to questions previously 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.

EDUCATION

Primary schools

In Bound Volume 40, page WA175, replace the answer to question (AQW 6786/09) asked by Mr Gardiner with:

Details of year end surpluses on primary schools budgets in each of the last three years (2005/06, 2006/07, 2007/08), are contained in the schools LMS Outturn Statements for each individual school which have been deposited in the Assembly Library. A summary of the amount of year-end surplus in each of the last three years for primary schools of all management types, broken down by Education and Library Board area is provided in the table below.

Under the Local Management of School (LMS) arrangements, a school may accumulate savings over a period of several years, however these should not be in excess of 5% or £75,000, whichever is the lesser, of their delegated budget unless they are being accumulated for specific purposes and are detailed in the school financial plans.

Tá na barrachais chinn bhliana ar fad leithdháilte ar scoileanna aonair agus tá sé de dhualagas ar na Boird Gobhanóirí scoile cinntí a dhéanamh ar cén dóigh a úsáidfear na barrachais seo, laistigh de théarmaí na Foirmle Có-mhaoinithe do scoileanna.

All year-end surpluses remain committed to individual schools and the decisions on how the surpluses are utilised are for the schools' Board of Governors to determine within the terms of the Common Funding Formula for schools.

PRIMARY SCHOOL SURPLUS BY EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA

| | 2005/06 | | 2006/07 | | 2007/08 | |
|---------------|---------------|---------|---------------|---------|---------------|---------|
| | No of Schools | (£000s) | No of Schools | (£000s) | No of Schools | (£000s) |
| Belfast | 35 | 1,808 | 47 | 2,763 | 54 | 4,126 |
| North Eastern | 128 | 2,914 | 158 | 5,719 | 180 | 6,780 |
| South Eastern | 89 | 4,846 | 101 | 5,556 | 120 | 7,834 |
| Southern | 119 | 3,398 | 145 | 5,202 | 168 | 7,094 |
| Western | 141 | 4,461 | 160 | 7,195 | 177 | 8,879 |

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