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Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT

(Hansard)

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<i>Deputy First Minister</i>	Mr Martin McGuinness
<i>Minister for Employment and Learning</i>	Sir Reg Empey
<i>Minister for Regional Development</i>	Mr Conor Murphy
<i>Minister for Social Development</i>	Ms Margaret Ritchie
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<i>Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment</i>	Mrs Arlene Foster
<i>Minister of the Environment</i>	Mr Edwin Poots
<i>Minister of Finance and Personnel</i>	Mr Sammy Wilson
<i>Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety</i>	Mr Michael McGimpsey

Junior Ministers

<i>Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister</i>	Mr Gerry Kelly
	Mr Robin Newton

* *During the period 11 January 2010 to 3 February 2010, Mrs Arlene Foster was designated as Acting First Minister.*

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 11 January 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MATTERS OF THE DAY

Constable Peadar Heffron

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

Mr Ford: It is right that our first task in this new year is to send our best wishes for full recovery to Constable Peadar Heffron and to tell his wife, parents, family, friends and colleagues that they are very much in our thoughts and prayers at this time.

The facts of the case are well known. At 6.30 am last Friday, Constable Heffron was on his way to take up his duty in Woodbourne police station in west Belfast. He was driving along the Milltown Road, between Randalstown and Antrim. His wife drove behind him. A bomb exploded under his car, causing him serious injury, and he remains on the critical list in the Royal Victoria Hospital even as we meet.

Nine months ago, almost to the day, Sappers Patrick Azimkar and Mark Quinsey were murdered at the gates of Massereene Barracks, barely a mile from where Friday's atrocity occurred. On that occasion, the people of Antrim stood united against the terrorists who had visited such horror on them. As a representative of Antrim, I have no doubt that the people of Antrim today stand united against those who visited this further horror on them and their community.

The attempt to murder a police officer on his way to carry out his duty of serving the people of Northern Ireland will be condemned throughout the community.

Indeed, it has already been condemned throughout these islands. I do not expect that any words of mine will have any effect on those who carried out the attack, but I trust that the united views of community, Church and political leaders may just possibly have an effect on those who may be tempted down that path. The dissidents have nothing to offer but utterly spurious and bogus claims, death and destruction.

I say to Peadar's wife, parents, friends and family circle that we sympathise with them. I say to his colleagues in the Police Service, in particular those in Antrim and west Belfast, that the people of Northern Ireland thank them for their professionalism and courage. Earlier this morning, I spoke to the Chief Constable, and I know that he and his officers are committed to continuing to work towards building a community policing service and to meeting the needs of the community as a Police Service that is becoming fully representative of the community that it serves.

I say to the people of Antrim that it is vital that anyone who has any information whatsoever that may help to catch those who carried out that atrocity assists the police. It is not up to them to decide what is relevant; it is up to the police.

Although I do not wish to detract from the main purpose of today, I want to address fellow MLAs. The key way in which we, as an Assembly, can act against the dissidents is by showing that politics works, by showing that we can deliver for the people and by demonstrating good governance. Petty squabbles and childish stand-offs do nothing to advance the needs of the community. We must overcome the current problems that we are experiencing to advance the political process and the peace process.

Peadar Heffron is exactly the kind of police officer that this society needs. He joined the Police Service of Northern Ireland in its very early days, at a time when it was not politically easy for someone from his background to do so. He demonstrated enormous courage when he did that. As a police officer, Mr Heffron has also done an enormous amount of work in advancing good relations, particularly through his work to bring the PSNI and the GAA closer together. The way that Peadar's colleagues from Woodbourne police station have stood with his family over the past four days is a testament to the high esteem and respect in which he is held. We offer him our concern and prayers.

Dr W McCrea: I am sure that every Member of the House thought, hoped and prayed that we had left such tragedies behind us. Sadly, last Friday morning brought the South Antrim community and Northern Ireland to a realisation that there are still wicked and evil men in society who desire to destroy the stability and tranquillity of Northern Ireland.

Peadar Heffron is a young man, and, although many people may speak about him as a Catholic police officer, as far as I and the people of my constituency are concerned, he is a police officer. Mr Heffron is a police officer of courage and distinction. He is a young man who put his life on the line to give the rest of the people of Northern Ireland stability, and, tragically, he is seriously ill. I say to his dear wife, parents and family circle that, on behalf of my colleague and my party, we extend our good wishes to Peadar and the nursing staff and doctors who are fighting for his return to health and strength.

A few months ago, just a mile down the road from where Mr Heffron was attacked, two young soldiers were brutally murdered and two young civilians were brutally attacked. Mr Ford rightly said that the community in South Antrim and Northern Ireland as a whole stood aghast and condemned without reservation the brutal attack on those two soldiers and two civilians. Today, we stand united to condemn the most recent attack, but our condemnation will not be enough. I genuinely believe that those who have the responsibility in the PSNI to find out where the evil persons are must go after them and bring them to justice. I believe that today the House will stand united against that brutal act of terrorism. I salute Peadar and his family's courage, and I earnestly pray that he will soon be restored to a measure of health and strength.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I wish to add my voice to that of my colleagues from South Antrim in saying that it is vital that we continue to provide a unanimous response, as we did to the events of last year. Such events demand that we are consistent and determined in repudiating and condemning them.

I unambiguously condemn the attack on Peadar Heffron. Undoubtedly, local controversy surrounded the circumstances in which that young man made the decision to become a policeman. However, subsequent events and the changes to policing in our society compel all those who are capable of acknowledging the radical nature of that reform to review their opinions. I extend my best wishes for a speedy and complete recovery to Peadar Heffron, and I offer my sympathy and support to his wife and extended family.

It is important that we send a clear message to dissident republicans that they act in total disregard of the wishes of the people of Ireland. The radical and progressive reforms to policing in this society have been given a democratic mandate and endorsement by the people. The irony at the core of the objection to the devolution of policing and justice to locally elected and democratic structures is that the dissidents' fear is shared only by those within unionism who resist the transfer of those powers. I ask those who rightly oppose and condemn the attack to examine the possibility of

further isolating dissident groups and taking away from them the spurious vestige of an argument that they somehow attack the British state — it is our policing that they attack.

Mr Kinahan: In common with everyone in the House, I am appalled by what happened last week, and I know that all Members are disgusted by the attack. It was a sinister, cowardly targeting of a policeman who showed the best of what we all should be. He made a brave decision to join our police force and led in everything that he did. Today, he is critically ill. We must all give our sympathy, pray for him and offer help. We must not forget his wife, family and everyone else involved. We must praise the police force for all the work that it does.

I would also like to praise the people of Antrim. I know that they will all be pulling together. Members should know that, a year ago, Mrs Azimkar commented on how wonderful the people in Antrim were and on how everybody pulled together. We know that they will do so again.

Everyone in the House must also pull together. I do not want to engage in any petty politics; however, the systems here must work. I would like the Heffron family to know that the entire UUP and all Members are appalled by the attack.

Mr Durkan: On behalf of my party, I join my Assembly colleagues in utter condemnation of the attack. We send our deepest sympathy and support to Peadar Heffron and all who love him, and we express our total appreciation for those who care for him now. It is not a matter only for one constituency but, particularly on behalf of Thomas Burns the MLA for South Antrim and Alex Attwood the MLA for West Belfast, where Constable Heffron serves, I stress that we are all united in rejecting the violence, the ways and the arguments of those who attacked Constable Heffron. We are united in offering our support to his family and to the entire policing family, all of whom are under threat at this time. The awful events on Friday demonstrate just how vulnerable any individual can be.

Like all his colleagues, Constable Heffron has decided to serve this community through the vocation of policing, and everything that we have heard about him shows that he has done so in a totally professional and highly personable way. We offer our full support and respect to him as he makes his way to recovery.

12.15 pm

It is also important that we make it very clear to those who sought to injure Constable Heffron that we will not allow them to do injury to the democratic process that we have chosen and that all in the Chamber represent. It is very important that we stand strong and united today. No matter what other issues, differences or difficulties there are, one solid and compelling message

that must go out to the so-called dissident, so-called republicans is that they will not damage our institutions. We stand strong and united today, but it is also important that those people get the message that we are not standing still. We are moving forward on the path of democracy and reconciliation that we have decided upon, and we will take the necessary decisions and steps to bring that to a conclusion and to defeat their evil and negative agenda.

Ms Purvis: Constable Heffron symbolises the level of citizenship and service that is required for a new Northern Ireland. On behalf of the Progressive Unionist Party, I send my thoughts to him, his wife and his family, and I hope that he pulls through. I also send my thoughts to the wider police family.

The criminals who carried out the attack are out of touch with the majority of people in Northern Ireland. The majority of people in Northern Ireland want to see politics delivering for everyone, and I hope that the House can resolve to do that. I appeal to anyone in the community who thinks otherwise not to attempt the job of the police or distract them from pursuing the criminals responsible for the attack. Like the Chief Constable this morning, I appeal to the public to assist the police in bringing the criminals responsible for the attack before the courts.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you confirm whether you have received any communication from the First Minister indicating that he will make a statement to the Assembly on his intention to initiate an internal departmental inquiry into the financial issues raised by the BBC Northern Ireland 'Spotlight' programme on Thursday 7 January? Are you aware of the serious concerns held by a growing number of Members about the effectiveness, comprehensive nature and independence of the inquiry being initiated or, rather, advocated by the First Minister? Will you advise Members on the proper procedures that should be followed to protect the integrity of the House and the code of conduct for Members?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his lengthy point of order, which strayed into three areas. First, I have had no correspondence from the First Minister on any of the issues that the Member raised. Secondly, I advise all Members that there are a number of conventions and procedures that they can follow. For example, as Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, Mr Kennedy can take advice from the clerks of that Committee, which is a way forward.

The issues involved are complicated, and I would prefer that Members did not try to raise them through points of order, because that is not the proper procedure for dealing with such matters. I advise the whole House of that with regard to the matter in question and other issues.

Mr McNarry: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. In cognisance of what you said and of the procedures and mechanisms, I will ask, if it is correct to do so whether you have received, either today or prior to today, any resignations from Members.

Mr Speaker: As the Member knows, as soon as I receive a resignation from any Member, I announce it quickly to the House. I intend to do that in the future.

The House may wish to know that I have accepted a question for urgent oral answer to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That may resolve some of the issues. It will be answered at 3.30 pm, immediately after Question Time. Given the intense interest in the issue, I intend to depart from normal convention and allow a representative from each political party to ask a supplementary question, if they so wish. I consider it wise that I announce that now.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Financial Provisions Bill

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I inform Members that the Financial Provisions Bill has received Royal Assent. The Financial Provisions Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 became law on 15 December 2009.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

New Assembly Member: Mr Billy Leonard

Mr Speaker: I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Mr Billy Leonard has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the East Londonderry constituency to fill the vacancy that resulted from the resignation of Mr Francie Brolly. Mr Leonard signed the Roll of Membership in the presence of me and the Clerk to the Assembly/Director General in the Speaker's Office on Thursday 7 January 2010 and entered his designation. Mr Leonard has now taken his seat.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council

Trade and Business Development Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that she wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in trade and business development sectoral format.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): With your permission, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 regarding a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in trade and business development sectoral format. The meeting was held in Corick House Hotel, Clogher, County Tyrone on Wednesday 16 December 2009.

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should leave the Chamber in an orderly fashion.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Executive were represented by me, in my capacity as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and by junior Minister Gerry Kelly from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Irish Government were represented by Mary Coughlan TD, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment. This statement has been agreed with junior Minister Kelly, and I make it on behalf of us both. I chaired the meeting in my capacity as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

The chief executive of InterTradeIreland, Liam Nellis, presented a progress report on InterTradeIreland's performance and business activities, including the generation of £61.2 million of business development value; a total of 2,801 firms utilising InterTradeIreland's knowledge and resources; and 328 firms participating on InterTradeIreland's programme/networks. Ministers also received a presentation from the chairperson of InterTradeIreland, Dr David Dobbin, on the strategic review that was undertaken by its board.

The Council discussed InterTradeIreland's business plan for 2009 and noted that it had applied efficiency savings to the 2009 budget in accordance with guidance issued by the two Finance Departments. Ministers approved the 2009 business plan and recommended the 2009 budget provision of £10,781,500 for InterTradeIreland.

Ministers noted InterTradeIreland's draft business plan for 2010. The future plans of InterTradeIreland as set out in the draft business plan for 2010 include the increase of the body's return on investment to 8:1; the

generation of £62 million or €70 million trade and business development value; 500 new firms to be engaged in cross-border business trade and business development; and the creation of 125 new jobs.

Ministers received a presentation from InterTrade-Ireland on the body's report on co-operation in the area of science, technology and innovation and noted a paper that was prepared by InterTradeIreland on co-operation on research and development. They welcomed the US/Ireland research and development partnership approach, which aims to increase the level of co-operation among researchers across the US, Ireland and Northern Ireland, including the developments to date. Ministers noted that the paper outlines economic partnership, contains priority activities, including the US/Ireland/Northern Ireland research and development partnership, the European dimension FP7, and possibilities for both jurisdictions to work together to maximise drawdown of EU funds that are not subject to match funding.

They also noted opportunities for further collaboration including the development of an early alert system for potential FP7 proposals; identification of areas where Northern Ireland and Ireland have shared interests and expertise; and utilisation of InterTradeIreland's Research Connections programme. Ministers asked officials to report progress to a future NSMC meeting.

The Council also approved the appointment of John Hunter and Tony Crooks to the board of the North/South Language Body, with responsibility for the exercise of the functions of the body through the Ulster-Scots Agency, from 16 December 2009 to 30 June 2010; the appointment of John Hunter as chairperson of the board of the Ulster-Scots Agency from 16 December 2009 to 30 June 2010; and the appointment of Vincent Parker to the board of InterTradeIreland from 16 December 2009 to 10 October 2011.

The Council noted InterTradeIreland's annual review of activities and annual accounts for 2008 and agreed that its next meeting in trade and business development sectoral format would take place in spring 2010. I commend the statement to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr A Maginness): I thank the Minister for her detailed report on the meeting and commend the good work of InterTradeIreland, which, I believe, has the full support of the Minister and the Council. I note the future programme of InterTradeIreland, the aim of engaging 500 new firms in cross-border trade and business development and the creation of 125 jobs. Is the aim of creating 125 jobs somewhat less than ambitious? There is, in fact, greater job potential deriving from the good work of InterTradeIreland, and, although the intention is to engage 500 new firms, I hope that a higher figure could be achieved.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for his comments. In the current circumstances, it may well be that those may happen. He will know that InterTradeIreland is not a job creation organisation; it is a trade organisation, and, although there is no doubt that many of its programmes have created jobs, those are indirect jobs. InterTradeIreland's primary purpose is to increase trade between the two jurisdictions, and I am glad to report that there are many firms in Northern Ireland during the recession that had never exported before but that now have their first opportunity to do so, which is a positive development. I hope that those firms will use that opportunity to export wider. The Chairperson will know that to have more firms exporting from Northern Ireland is one of Invest Northern Ireland's key objectives.

I have made the point on a number of occasions that it is important that Invest Northern Ireland and InterTrade-Ireland work together and not against each other. I am glad to be able to tell the Chairperson that I have raised that issue with the chief executive and the chairman on a number of occasions. Of course, we have the advantage that Dr Dobbin is on the boards of Invest Northern Ireland and InterTradeIreland, which I welcome.

I say again that the purpose of InterTradeIreland is not job creation primarily. Obviously, in the current climate, we will take jobs wherever we can get them. However, in any event, we hope to increase the trade that already exists.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she comment on the efficiency savings that are expected of InterTradeIreland?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: InterTradeIreland was given its remits by the two Finance Ministers. It had been required to achieve a minimum of 3% efficiency savings, and I am glad to inform the House that those have been achieved. We have approved the 2009 business plan, and I have recommended that the budget provision for InterTrade-Ireland be accepted. I am content that those efficiency savings have been made. There are always more that can be made, and, if that happens, we will welcome it. We will keep looking for those savings to be made.

I commend the chief executive of InterTradeIreland and the chairperson of its board for the work that they are doing to make efficiency savings at a time when, let us face it, we are under severe financial pressure. I welcome the fact that they have been able to achieve those savings.

12.30 pm

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. The role that InterTradeIreland plays in creating increased cross-border trade has already been mentioned. The Minister

may recall that, last year, I asked how much funding DETI had given to InterTradeIreland over the past three years. I think that the answer was somewhere in the region of £3.5 million a year. Given what the Minister has outlined in her statement and the role that InterTradeIreland plays, does she plan to increase funding to that organisation in order to increase cross-border economic activity in the present climate?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I hope that the Member listened to my response to Mr Moutray's question. The reality is that rather than more money being available to all those bodies, there is less. That does not mean that they cannot do the job effectively. The challenge for all public bodies in moving forward will be to try to deal with what they have and to do so in a more efficient and effective way. That is what I want to see from InterTradeIreland. It is aware of that, and I have no reason to doubt that that is what the Tánaiste will want to see in the Republic of Ireland. The Member may wish to see the budget to InterTradeIreland increased, but that is highly unlikely. However, I hope that it will make efficient use of the moneys that it has.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for her statement on the meeting held on 16 December 2009. I noted that, at that meeting, the budget for 2009 was approved and the business plan for 2010 was noted. Will the Minister explain the difference between those two matters? Has the budget for 2010 been approved?

The anticipated increase in InterTradeIreland's return on investment is 8:1. Is that a bit bullish? Will the Minister share with us the figure achieved for 2009?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am happy to let the Member have the 2009 figure in writing.

The difference between approving the budget and noting the business plan is that we were not in a position to approve the 2010 business plan. That remains subject to my approval in the Department, the respective finance Departments, and, thereafter, the North/South Ministerial Council. All the ducks were not in a row before the Council meeting in Clogher, so, unfortunately, we were not able to approve the plan. However, we noted it and the progress that had been made.

I am happy to come back to the Member on what has been achieved on the ratio this year. Although I take the Chairperson's point about targets for job creation and firms, a return on investment of 8:1 is a challenging target to set, and I will keep in close contact on that.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for her statement. I commend the work of InterTradeIreland, as did the Chairperson of the Committee. Did any discussions take place about the proposed new North/South electricity

interconnector, which I believe will benefit businesses on both sides of the border?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: No; the interconnector was not on the agenda for the Clogher meeting. However, I share the Member's view that it will help businesses on both sides of the border and give us security of supply, sustainability and the increased competition that we all look for in the single electricity market. Although the interconnector was not discussed at the December meeting, I am sure that it will be discussed at a future meeting.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her report. I am intrigued by her comment about getting the ducks in a row. As a shooting man, I am always in favour of getting all the ducks in a row. We get a bigger score when it comes to pulling the trigger.

I have a couple of questions, and the first is about the Ulster-Scots Agency. There is concern, and Members are aware that there has been concern in the past, about the North/South Language Body. Many of us would like an assurance that the Ulster-Scots language will be an equal partner on that body. Secondly, what is InterTradeIreland doing to avoid duplication with Invest Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am certainly not going to comment on Jim Shannon's strategy for shooting ducks, and I am pretty reticent to comment on the Ulster-Scots Agency. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure asked me to take the matter forward at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting on trade and business development so that it could be dealt with before the end of the calendar year. I did that by gaining the Council's approval for the appointments of John Hunter and Tony Crooks. That was an essential element, and we were happy to do it for the Minister.

Regarding the question about duplication with Invest Northern Ireland, I said to another Member that it is an important area. InterTradeIreland and Invest Northern Ireland were set up around the same time, and, therefore, it was perhaps a little difficult for each organisation to find its own space in the area of cross-border trade and the consequent job opportunities and wealth creation. However, each organisation has now found its position. They work with each other at chief executive and chairperson level, and they communicate very well to avoid duplication.

InterTradeIreland has also undertaken useful work in areas in which it may not have been before. In the past, it may have been perceived as an organisation that works along the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. That is simply not the case any more, and, indeed, one of InterTradeIreland's most successful seminars was held in Ballymena. InterTradeIreland was pleased with the way in which that went,

and it hopes to hold more seminars in Northern Ireland. I hope that InterTradeIreland will encourage businesses that have never exported to the Republic of Ireland to do so for the first time and gain the accruing benefits.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement, and I welcome the positive comments in that statement and in her responses to questions on economic partnership. Does the Minister agree that there must be a clearer focus on attracting investment on an all-island basis rather than on the basis of competition between the North and the South, as happens currently? Would the Minister welcome that?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I say to the Member: I suppose it was worth a try. InterTradeIreland is concerned with encouraging cross-border trade between the two jurisdictions. It has worked well, particularly this year because of our advantage in relation to the euro. Regarding the Member's point about securing investment for the whole island as opposed to the country that we live in, the fact is that we are often in competition with the Republic of Ireland in attracting foreign direct investors. Therefore, we need to make a strong case.

That does not mean that Invest Northern Ireland should not work with the appropriate body in the Republic of Ireland, especially when both organisations want to pool their resources for visits to China and other places. However, we must reflect on the fact that, in many respects, we are in competition with the Republic of Ireland, just as we are in competition with other parts of the United Kingdom. It is my job as the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to do the best for this jurisdiction, and that is what I am intent on doing.

Dr McDonnell: I regret the Minister's decision not to respond to Mr Shannon's comments about ducks in a row. I wonder whether she will have a discussion with us about sitting ducks, but perhaps we will leave that for another day.

I am interested in the science, technology and innovation reports, and co-operation on research and development. Over the past few years, I have been impressed by the massive effort that Shorts makes with universities across the island of Ireland. Does the Minister have any plans to drive forward more of that type of research or any of the recommendations in the reports? Will the Minister give any commitment to further investment in R&D in general?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member knows very well that one of the recommendations of the independent review of economic policy (IREP) report, about which I hope to come to the House in the near future, is the need to increase our research and development. He is absolutely right to concentrate on InterTradeIreland's work in that area

because it can help Invest Northern Ireland and really build that critical mass in relation to research and development.

So far, InterTradeIreland has been focusing on four key areas of economic and social importance: nanotechnology, sensor technology, cystic fibrosis and diabetes. As the Member will know, those, and particularly the latter two, are areas that can really make a difference to people's lives. Therefore, we very much want to see that work moving forward. I commend very much the work that has been carried out by InterTradeIreland in the US-Ireland Research and Development Partnership. I want to see InterTradeIreland building in that area. As I said in my statement, there are potential areas in relation to the seventh framework programme from Europe. I hope that I am right in saying that one does not need match funding, which is a real advantage because there has been a real difficulty in finding a match funder for some recent funding from Europe.

I agree with the Member wholeheartedly: research and development is a key area, particularly for us here in Northern Ireland. We want to increase that, so if InterTradeIreland can help us to do so, then so much the better.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the report. I also welcome the support that the Minister indicated for InterTradeIreland extending its outreach beyond border areas and into other parts of the jurisdictions. That is a point well made, and we should not be so insular in that regard.

Arising from Dr McDonnell's question and given what the Minister said earlier in reply to another question about why reports get noted as opposed to approved, is it her intention to approve the InterTradeIreland report on co-operation, research and development, and to recommend to the Department of Finance and Personnel that it should approve it also? Arising from that, is she prepared to come back to the House to make a statement about what the shape of co-operation, research and development may be on the island in respect of the work of InterTradeIreland?

Will the Minister indicate the broad content of Dr Dobbin's presentation on the strategic review of InterTradeIreland, to which she referred in the opening paragraphs of her statement? What was the core message of that strategic review? Is the Minister in a position to share with Members a copy of that presentation so that we can determine where Dr Dobbin believes that InterTradeIreland needs to go in the future?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I certainly have no difficulty, and cannot see any difficulty, with the presentation being shared. From my recollection — and the presentation was given on 16 December 2009 — it was really about how InterTradeIreland could add value to what happens in both jurisdictions with its job- and wealth-creation agencies, how those

could work together better, how the organisation is coping with the economic downturn and what differences that has made to how it moves forward. It needs to be flexible and to have appropriate programmes. The presentation was also about the challenges that lie ahead in relation to the fact that it has had to make efficiency savings and to deal with the finance that it has from the two Departments.

I welcome very much the work that InterTradeIreland has carried out in relation to research and development. I will consider very carefully anything that it puts before me in the context of what we are trying to do with research and development here in Northern Ireland. I think that Dr McDonnell referred to the fact that there are some very good partnerships between universities and higher education institutions across Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and, indeed, Scotland, particularly regarding research and development. Those partnerships have meant that they have been able to access European funding in a way that they may not have been able to if activity was just happening within the jurisdiction.

I am very happy to look at anything that is put before me in that regard. I will certainly see whether we can get the Member a copy of Dr Dobbin's response.

12.45 pm

North/South Ministerial Council

Tourism Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that she wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in tourism sectoral format.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make a statement regarding a meeting of the North South Ministerial Council in tourism sectoral format, which was also held in Clogher on 16 December 2009. Junior Minister Gerry Kelly and I represented the Northern Ireland Executive. The Irish Government were represented by Martin Cullen TD, Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism. My statement has been agreed with junior Minister Kelly. I make the statement on behalf of us both.

The Council considered a report from the Chairperson of Tourism Ireland, Mr Hugh Friel, on the work of its board and noted the very difficult global economic conditions that had a negative impact on tourism performance in 2009.

The Council discussed Tourism Ireland's business plan for 2009 and noted that Tourism Ireland had applied efficiency savings to its 2009 budget in accordance with guidance issued by the two finance Departments. The Council approved the 2009 business plan and recommended the 2009 budget provision of £55.652 million for Tourism Ireland.

The Council noted Tourism Ireland's draft business plan for 2010 and its key priorities, which included delivering growth of 3% in visitor numbers to Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in 2010; sustaining or improving the island of Ireland's competitiveness interest ranking in each top 10 source markets; growing total promotable visitors to Northern Ireland by more than 10% in 2010; increasing participation by the industry in co-operative sales opportunities by 20% in our top 10 markets by December 2010; and improving Tourism Ireland's organisational efficiency and effectiveness in 2010.

The Council received a presentation from Tourism Ireland's chief executive, Niall Gibbons, on its review of the Great Britain market and welcomed a 10-point marketing action plan that is designed to ensure that visitor numbers from Great Britain return to growth in the short term.

The Council noted Tourism Ireland's annual report and accounts for 2008. It also approved 2009 business plans for the North/South Language Body, Waterways

Ireland and the Food Safety Promotion Board. The Council agreed to hold its next meeting in tourism sectoral format in spring 2010.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr A Maginness): I thank the Minister for her detailed report. I note the comment in the report that the very difficult global economic conditions had a negative impact on tourism in 2009. Everybody recognises that. However, this year's forward plan for Tourism Ireland seeks to deliver growth of 3% in the number of visitors to Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in 2010. In addition, it is committed to:

“growing total promotable visitors to Northern Ireland by more than 10% in 2010”.

Given that we are out of the recession but have not fully recovered, are the targets that were put forward by Tourism Ireland achievable?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: There is no doubt that very challenging targets have been set by Tourism Ireland. However, it feels that they can be met. I commend the energy with which Tourism Ireland has attacked the issue, because, to be entirely honest, as I am being, independent analysts are saying that we will remain in a very slightly negative economic position this year. Therefore, to turn that around to 3% growth for the entirety of both jurisdictions will be a huge challenge to Tourism Ireland.

However, I have been impressed by its plans and strategies for attacking markets moving forward, particularly key markets, which for us include Great Britain, with the Great Britain review to which I referred, and other markets, such as Germany, which Tourism Ireland wants to attack. I accept that the targets are challenging, but because I attended the launch of the 2010 business plan at the Ulster Museum, I know that the industry very much wants to make growth happen. That is why it talks about more:

“participation by the industry in co-operative sales opportunities”.

That really must become part of what is being done for us by Tourism Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

I am encouraged by the industry's attitude.

Mr Campbell: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. She referred to the GB review. Last year was, and the coming year will probably be, difficult. However, given the currency advantages that we have in relation to the Irish Republic, will the Minister outline the possible advantages and outlook of the 10-point marketing plan, whereby we could expect to see significant gains in the next two or three years?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Great Britain is our most important overseas tourist market and, due to the recession and economic factors, many people are engaging in the horrendous pastime

of “staycations” and, therefore, are not moving from the island of GB. That presents a huge challenge, which Tourism Ireland is attacking with vigour. Tourism Ireland has presented me with a 10-point marketing plan, which comprises two phases: a stabilisation phase, followed by a recovery phase.

Stabilisation is all about re-engaging with and re-energising the GB trade to look at Northern Ireland as a place that, although it lies across a small stretch of water, is still a sterling area and, therefore, is good value for money. There is a need to promote that value. We want to reinforce our cultural difference as a reason why people should come. Obviously, we cannot sell Northern Ireland on its weather, so we must think about other ways to encourage people to come here. The recovery phase will target business visitors, who tend to spend more than people who come to stay with family and friends. I am content that plans are in place, and we are now moving into the next stage, which is to implement them. I will be watching that process carefully.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. The Minister touched on cultural tourism, which seems to be a growth area, particularly in the North. Given the challenging target of 3% growth, does the marketing plan include any mention of how cultural tourism can be used to attract more visitors to Ireland, particularly the North of Ireland?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: We did not touch specifically on that subject, but it is addressed in the 10-point marketing plan. In the short term, as part of the stabilisation phase, we want to reinforce our cultural differences, not just between ourselves, but between ourselves and other places, so that visitors get a different experience here than they would get at home. We can use culture in a positive, rather than a negative, way. Tourism Ireland has engaged with, to use that terrible phrase, both sides of Northern Ireland culture, and it has done so proactively and fairly. Bodies such as the Grand Orange Lodge, as well as people from the Member's community, recognise that Tourism Ireland has been proactive and is trying to operate in a fair and just way.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for her statement. Tourism is very important for everyone in Northern Ireland. My thoughts on targets run parallel to those of the Chairman of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Targets must be meaningful, and I see that those for 2010 are quite bullish. We are talking about 3% growth in visitor numbers to Northern Ireland and the Republic this year and about growing total promotable visitors to Northern Ireland by 10%. The Minister also referred to visitor numbers from Great Britain, which we are expecting to return to growth. Are those figures based on last year's actual

performance and last year's Budget performance, and are they achievable again?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Yes, the targets have been arrived at against the background of what happened this year, and, as I said, independent analysts have indicated how difficult it will be to meet them.

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

A steering group was set up that was made up of representatives from Tourism Ireland and the industry at large. That group developed the action plan for GB and for tourism growth in particular.

The tourism industry in Northern Ireland went through a horrendous time for many years. Let us face it, anyone who owned a hotel in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s found that it was a difficult business to run. However, over the past year, visitors from the Republic of Ireland have helped to cushion the difficulties that we have with the GB market. Indeed, we have seen an increase of more than 30% in visitors coming from the Republic of Ireland, many of whom are coming for the first time. To be honest, when those visitors have got over the barrier of coming to Northern Ireland, and once they have come here and received the hospitality of our tourism industry, I am hopeful that they will return.

The targets are challenging, and I accept what the Member said. However, we need to be positive about tourism, because frankly, as I have said time and time again, it has all the potential to be a key economic driver for Northern Ireland.

Mr Neeson: I welcome Tourism Ireland's improved advertising and promotion campaign, and I mentioned already in the Assembly that it has highlighted Carrickfergus Castle in that campaign. Did any discussions take place about improving transport links to maximise the number of tourists coming to Northern Ireland and to the Republic of Ireland?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The transport links were not specifically mentioned, but the Member will know that I will soon be in receipt of the tourism review for Northern Ireland. It is interesting that all the Departments have been involved in that review, including DRD, which was involved in discussing transport links. Therefore, the Member is absolutely right: there is no point in Tourism Ireland selling this part of the world as a good place to come and have a holiday if visitors cannot get to the places that they want to go due to, among other things, the lack of appropriate signage, and so forth. We need a more integrated way of looking at tourism. I await the tourism review with interest, and I look forward to it.

The Member is right about the fact that more places of interest in Northern Ireland have been appearing in

Tourism Ireland's advertising campaign. It even manages to include Fermanagh from time to time. That has nothing to do with me, as he might imagine, but it is important that our iconic places to visit, such as the Giant's Causeway and the Titanic Quarter, feature in the advertisements. I am glad to say that that is happening now.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she give me her assessment of how she feels the Republic of Ireland market has performed? By that I mean the number of tourists who come from the Republic of Ireland.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

As I said in response to an earlier question, the Republic of Ireland market has helped to cushion the downturn in the number of visitors coming from the rest of the United Kingdom.

Over the past year, the tourism industry has had a number of highs and lows. It has had the high of seeing the biggest ever increase of visitors coming from the Republic of Ireland. In the first half of the year, that figure increased by 31%, but more importantly, total revenue from the Republic of Ireland rose by 37%. As the Member will know, we have challenging targets to meet in the Programme for Government where not just visitor numbers but spend are concerned. Therefore, those figures encourage me. However, we cannot sit back and say that because more visitors are coming from the Republic of Ireland, the situation is all great and dandy. We need to increase the numbers of visitors from all places who come to Northern Ireland, and that is what Tourism Ireland is focused on.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given the importance of tourism to the economy, is the Minister concerned that the delivery of a number of tourism projects is being held up due to the delay in a number of cross-body groups not being able to draw down the INTERREG IVA funding?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

It is not just tourism projects that have been held up because of that delay. Indeed, I took the opportunity to meet with Pat Colgan recently to discuss a number of projects. Some project promoters wrote to me to voice concerns that they had not been able to draw down that money, and I have asked two departmental colleagues to monitor actively what is happening with those applications. They have made themselves known to SEUPB, and they have said that they will work very closely with the body. They have also made themselves known to the different bodies so that they can work with them.

1.00 pm

Much of the time, there is a lack of communication between those different bodies. They need to understand what must be done in the first instance, rather than be

told about it six months or a year later. I am determined that departmental officials will work with and help SEUPB and the different cross-border bodies so that we can get this over the line. I certainly do not want to lose that extra money for tourism in Northern Ireland.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her statement. In response to previous questions, she indicated tourism's clear economic value, of which we must take advantage, particularly with regard to the number of people who cross the border to shop.

Last week, a friend of mine visited Dublin. She remarked that basic goods, such as milk and bread, are twice the price down South that they are in Northern Ireland.

People cross the border and spend money. Does the Minister intend to try to encourage those people not only to do their shopping but to stay here for a while? If so, what incentives are offered to make that happen?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It is very much my intention to encourage those people to stay. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board has been engaged in campaigns, particularly in the Republic of Ireland, to ask people not only to come up and do their shopping but to take advantage of the marvellous food that is on offer and the short breaks that they can avail themselves of if they want to come up to shop. The board is proactive in that regard. The industry is working hard, particularly in the towns that those shoppers visit. Those towns are in areas of great beauty, and we must take advantage of that.

Many of those people have not been to Northern Ireland for a long time if, indeed, at all. They need to know what is available here. When they are shopping, they can be made aware of everything else that is going on in the tourism industry.

Mr Attwood: I also welcome the Minister's statement. I want to ask her two questions.

First, regardless of whether 3% growth in visitor numbers to Northern Ireland and the Republic is challenging, is there not an argument for Tourism Ireland to have a target to increase the number of tourists who come into the Republic of Ireland and who then come to the North? If there is a 3% increase in visitor numbers to Northern Ireland, it is, self-evidently, at a lower threshold than a 3% increase in visitor numbers to the Republic of Ireland. Figures confirm that. Is there not, therefore, an argument to encourage visitors to the South, for whom the Republic of Ireland is the intended limit of their travels, to visit the North and to increase the number of visitors there? There should be differential figures in that regard.

Secondly, can anything more be done to ensure that Tourism Ireland, which, clearly, because of relationships and proximity, has insight into the British tourism market,

works with the NITB on the marketing campaigns for which it is responsible in Britain, given that it is responsible for marketing the island as a whole?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Member for his two questions. He is correct. Let us be honest; there are more flights into Dublin Airport than there are into Belfast, much to my regret. That is a fact. People use Dublin as a gateway. That is why the Northern Ireland Tourist Board has spent a great deal of money on advertising in Dublin Airport. It has upped its game in Dublin. It has now taken a new position in the city centre, which, not long ago, I visited when I was in Dublin for a North/South Ministerial Council meeting.

Therefore, the Member is correct: we need to target people who come to the Republic of Ireland and get them to visit Northern Ireland. Indeed, in 2009, when I was in India, part of the discussion was that if people come that distance, they may visit several places, such as London and Dublin. It is important that we put Belfast — and when I say "Belfast", I mean all of Northern Ireland — on the map for those people.

I certainly have no difficulty with the NITB working with Tourism Ireland on marketing. As the Member knows, the Tourist Board here deals with the whole island and Tourism Ireland deals with everybody else. Therefore, they have a vested interest to deal proactively. I hope that the new chief executive of Tourism Ireland and the chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board continue to do that.

Public Expenditure 2009-2010

December Monitoring Round

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on the public expenditure 2009-2010 December monitoring round.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement regarding the outcome of the December monitoring round, following the Executive's meeting on 17 December 2009.

This is the penultimate monitoring round of the 2009-2010 financial year, and I am pleased to announce that more than £32 million of allocations have been possible in this round. In my statements to the Assembly on the outcome of both the June and September monitoring rounds, I indicated that the improved spending performance demonstrated by Departments in the past financial year had implications for the management of the public expenditure position going forward. In particular, I highlighted the fact that we need to reduce our use of overcommitment as a tool for managing public expenditure. That remains the position in this monitoring round, where the highest priority must be given to the need to manage the overall financial position to protect the integrity of the Executive and the Northern Ireland block by ensuring that we do not overspend against the amounts available to us.

The simple reality is that, if, unlike the position under the previous direct rule Administration, Departments now spend the vast majority of the money that is available to them, we cannot, therefore, anticipate significant funds being returned to the Executive during the year, or anticipate large year-end underspends. That must be viewed for what it is: it is not a failure; it is a positive indication of an Executive that delivers expenditure on public services and evidence of improved financial management in Departments.

The prudent approach adopted in previous rounds has been borne out by the much lower level of reduced requirements surrendered in this round when viewed in relation to previous years. It is the adoption of such an approach that has allowed the Executive to make significant additional allocations to Departments in this round.

With regard to the detail of the December monitoring, the level of reduced requirements that were declared by Departments in that round was £27 million current expenditure and £37.2 million capital investment. Further details are set out in the tables attached to my statement. To underpin my point about better financial performance, I highlight that, in total, reduced requirements this year represent only 57.8% of the amount declared to the

same stage last year. That means that the amounts allocated to Departments in the previous Budget process are being used by Departments for the purposes for which they were intended, rather than being returned for redistribution, which is yet more evidence of successful delivery against the considered needs of the people of Northern Ireland.

Those figures include a £4 million current expenditure reduced requirement in respect of the funding made available to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) in the September round to address the costs of the response to the swine flu pandemic. It was agreed in September that any amounts not required for that specific purpose would be returned to the donor Departments. However, DHSSPS has also identified a current expenditure pressure of £0.9 million in respect of the roll out of the vaccination programme to the under fives, and it has been agreed that that amount should be made available to the Department. Therefore, the net amount of £3.2 million current expenditure has been returned to contributing Departments.

The amounts that are to be returned to individual Departments are shown in the proposed allocation tables that are attached to the statement.

As well as the reduced requirements surrendered by Departments, additional funding has also become available due to revised estimates of the EU match funding that is required this year; that is, £4.2 million current expenditure and £8 million capital investment for the first tranche of funding that has been received from the Republic of Ireland for the A5 and A8 road projects.

To further facilitate sound financial management in Departments, the Executive have allowed Departments to move resources across spending areas where that movement is reflective of a proactive management decision that has been taken to enable Departments to manage emerging pressures from within their existing baselines. Those Departments are to be commended for the actions that they have taken to address their pressures in that way. Due largely to technical issues, it has also been necessary to reclassify some amounts between different categories of expenditure. Details of all those changes are also provided in the tables that are attached to the statement.

Departments submitted bids for £30.8 million current expenditure and £28.6 million for capital investment in this round. However, as was mentioned earlier, the Executive's first priority must be to protect the integrity of the Northern Ireland block as a whole, and in the light of the improved performance of Departments last year, it is vital that we conclude this round with a prudent level of overcommitment. The impact of those changes means that although there is

significant scope for capital investment allocations, the ability to make current expenditure allocations is more constrained.

The current expenditure allocations that I am announcing today include £0.9 million to DHSSPS for the roll-out of the swine flu vaccination programme to under fives, the return of the remaining £3.2 million of swine flu funding to contributing Departments and £5 million of the remaining £10 million of DHSSPS's first call on available resources, which was agreed as part of the 2008-2011 Budget process.

In addition, I can announce that capital investment allocations totalling £23.6 million have also been agreed by the Executive, including a £0.9 million allocation to DHSSPS in response to the swine flu pandemic. The changing clinical attack rate of the virus means that there will be a lower level of stock utilisation of antiviral and antibiotic goods than envisaged in the original scenario. Although that has reduced overall costs, the accounting treatment of the stock has led to a capital departmental expenditure limit pressure.

I can also announce the allocation of £2.7 million to the Department of the Environment (DOE) to facilitate the full implementation of the Planning Service's e-PIC project, which has been developed to replace the obsolete 2020 planner. Furthermore, £15 million has been allocated to the Department for Regional Development (DRD) to increase the level of structural maintenance on roads that is carried out. That will be targeted to the highest priority areas and will make an important contribution to the local economy and to road safety.

Finally, £5 million has been allocated to the Department for Social Development (DSD) to address pressures that have arisen with housing renovation grants. Those pressures are due to a combination of unfunded opening commitments, accelerated in-year expenditure on mandatory grants by contractors and the necessity to issue a number of discretionary grants on the basis of exceptional need. That funding will have a positive impact on the community and the construction sector. Details of all those allocations are included in a table that is appended to the statement.

The consequence of the current expenditure and capital investment allocations is that the Executive conclude the December monitoring round with an overcommitment of £22.7 million for current expenditure and no overcommitment for capital investment. Given Departments' spending performance last year and the relatively low level of reduced requirements this year, that level of overcommitment represents a prudent and sensible position for this stage in the financial year.

1.15 pm

In conclusion, in the context of the action that Departments have taken to reduce end-year underspends, this monitoring round has seen welcome allocations

made to Executive priorities, and that has been made possible by the prudent and responsible approach that was adopted in previous monitoring rounds. In addition, we are concluding this round with a realistic level of overcommitment, which will ensure that the integrity of the Northern Ireland block is maintained. That is evidence of a locally elected Executive delivering for the people of Northern Ireland, and, for that reason, I commend the December monitoring position to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann): I thank the Minister for his statement. In statements on recent monitoring rounds, he has highlighted the welcome improvement in Departments' spending performance, which is leading to a reduction in the underspend. Does the Minister believe that that is as a result of improved financial forecasting and monitoring by Departments, or is it more to do with increased or unforeseen budgetary pressures?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Over the years, we have seen Departments better managing their finances. If improvements in spending performance had simply been down to budgetary pressures and unforeseen budgetary pressures, Departments would have been making bids for money that they had not been allocated in the first place. However, money is not being returned. In other words, Departments are not identifying reduced requirements. As I mentioned in the statement, allocations have been made so that money can be moved from one classification to another. That is allowed only when Departments proactively look ahead, identify a problem, decide how to remedy that problem and then make application to manage it by moving money from expenditure under one head, where they are perhaps not going to spend all that money, to another head under which they can spend it.

A combination of all those factors allowed Departments to spend 99.7 % of their budgets last year. Very little money was left at the end of the year. I think that we are heading in the same direction for this year. When one examines the allocations and proposed reclassifications outlined in table 3, one can see the number of Departments that has asked for reclassifications. That indicates that those Departments are looking ahead, managing money and making applications to move money across so that they do not hit difficulties.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he comment on the Barnett consequential arising from the UK Chancellor's pre-Budget report? It does not form part of his statement, but will the Minister clarify when the Barnett consequential will come into the system, and what his intention is with respect to those, bearing in mind that they have arisen as a result of the UK Government investing further in economic

recovery and in the green economy? Is the Minister minded to follow suit in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Mr Farry knows that, as to how we spend any allocations that are made to Northern Ireland as a result of the Barnett consequentials, we are not tied to the decisions that the Chancellor at Westminster makes. If that were the case, there would not be much point in our having this Assembly, because then we would simply be rubber-stamping the Chancellor's decisions and spending money in Northern Ireland as had been decided by the Treasury in England. We jealously guard the way in which Barnett consequentials are spent in Northern Ireland. They should and must be spent on the priorities that we set for ourselves.

In 2009-2010, we received £26.5 million of current expenditure in Barnett consequentials. In view of the fact that the majority of the efficiencies that we were going to be required to make in 2010 was in respect of current expenditure, we had hoped to use some of the Barnett consequentials to offset that pressure next year.

We asked Departments to consider spending money this year that was intended for projects next year so that the money from the Barnett consequentials could be offset against the savings that they will have to make this year. The result was that Departments did not bring forward any projects that they thought this could be used for. However, as Members are aware, pressures are coming from the equal pay settlement, and some of the Barnett consequentials will be used to bridge the gap between the money that was allocated as a result of the negotiations that my predecessors undertook with the Treasury and the equal pay bill.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. In contrast to the £8.5 million bid for IT Assist in the June 2009 monitoring round, there was a reduced requirement of £1.5 million in the December monitoring round. I understand that the explanation for that fairly wide divergence is that the level of transfer received from other Departments for IT Assist had been higher than the prudent estimate. Does the significant variance between the two figures over a relatively short period make the argument that there is an unwelcome weakness in the financial management of IT Assist, which is a division of the Department of Finance and Personnel? I strongly acknowledge the progress that has been made across the spectrum, and I hope that that work, which was led by the Minister and his Department, will continue. Notwithstanding that, perhaps that weakness in the Department needs addressed.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will come back to the Member with the detail on the reasons for the reduced requirement. The bald figure is contained in the table in my statement. Most of the projects are in

their infancy, and we will continue to work on the budgets that have been set for them. The level of work that many of the central services do will vary from time to time, and that could lead to the kind of figure to which the Member referred. Rather than hazarding a guess, I will come back to the Member with a more detailed explanation.

Mr Lunn: Does the Minister appreciate the irony of the Department of Education's having to return £3 million due to slippage in the establishment of the education and skills authority (ESA), given that that slippage is caused by the failure of his Executive to allow the ESA to progress?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Perhaps Mr Lunn can elucidate and give more explanation on the progress of the ESA than I can. As far as I know, he is still a member of the Committee for Education. The Education Bill is being discussed by the Committee for Education at present, and the Committee is going through that process. I see the Member shaking his head, but the Committee asked for an extension in dealing with the Bill, and, as he well knows, there are still issues around the Bill. Those issues include the transferors' position and safeguards for the controlled sector, and they have still not been addressed.

The last thing in the world that the Member would want is a Bill to be railroaded through the Assembly when there are sensitive issues about one particular education sector — in fact, the biggest education sector in Northern Ireland — that have not yet been addressed.

Therefore, money is not being spent on ESA because, until those issues are addressed, there can be no progress. That is not my responsibility; it is the responsibility of the Minister of Education. For those who have outstanding concerns about the whole issue of ESA, I hope that some certainty will be reached as quickly as possible.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he advise the House of the latest position on the delivery of the 3% efficiency target? He mentioned the Civil Service equal pay claim. What impact has that had on the financial position, and has it been incorporated into the figures?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As I said in response to a previous question, some of the Barnett consequential money can be used to deal with the equal pay settlement. Whether the entire equal pay claim will be settled in this financial year is another matter, because substantial work must still be done to establish the amount to which each individual is entitled. I suspect that the process will not be completed in this financial year.

The efficiency targets are important. Although individual Departments are responsible for the delivery

of the savings, it is important that my Department continues to monitor the delivery of the efficiency plans. I am pleased to say that the efficiency savings target for 2008-09 was fully achieved. A substantial amount of money, £273 million, was released in efficiencies in 2008-09. That is important because it means that there has been improvement in the way that local services are delivered.

The latest round of monitoring suggests that good progress is being made in respect of the targets for 2009-2010 and for 2010-11. Given the concerns that Members raised about front line services, I hope that the Assembly Committees will continue their important scrutiny of the development and delivery of the efficiency plans.

Mr McNarry: I realise that the Minister will have the last word, so happy new year to him. I am delighted to see Dr Paisley at his side. Perhaps, during the present difficulties, he will remain at the Minister's side for some time to come.

Does the improved spending performance mean that we need to reduce our reliance on overcommitment —

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: *[Interruption.]*

Mr McNarry: I apologise, Dr Paisley. Much as I would like to be able to hear you, I cannot, but whatever you said sounded funny.

If we are not to face the ramifications of breaking Treasury rules, must we reduce our reliance on overcommitment? Are we exposed through an inability to plug any holes that emerge, and, if so, does the Minister accept that he must endeavour, as I hope that he will, to review current practices?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for wishing me a happy new year. I always appreciate his support, just as I appreciate the excellent support of Dr Paisley, whom I am very pleased to have by my side. I know that he will be by my side and by the side of this party for a long time. I am happy about that.

As for the degree of overcommitment, there are several ways of dealing with the problems and unforeseen circumstances that arise in any budget over the course of a year. We all face situations in our households when we are hit suddenly by an unexpected bill or an unanticipated scenario. There are ways of dealing with such situations. Either one has some money set aside in a contingency fund, and I think that Mr McNarry was hinting at that, or one can reallocate money in the existing budget from one pot to another.

1.30 pm

Another option — and this relates to overcommitment — is that we may anticipate having money left over, on the basis that we never spend all the money in the

year. We may then decide that we can pay a certain bill because what we have anticipated in our Budget will not be spent anyway. That would be based on experience. Those are the three options open to us.

There is no right or wrong method in this. Mr McNarry advocates having a contingency fund. The question is how long we should hold on to that contingency fund. Should we hold on to it until the very last month of the year? We have had experience in the Assembly: the dioxin problem, for example, arose in the last month of the year and we were suddenly hit with a huge bill. However, if the crisis or occasion for spending that money does not arise and we do not spend that money, we may be in danger of having to give it back to the Treasury. Do we then just spend it willy-nilly on anything? That is one option.

The other option is to have that level of overcommitment and hope, on the basis of experience, that we will not spend all our money. Unfortunately, that appears to be an option which is increasingly less open to us, because we find that we are spending our Budget better, for all the reasons I have given. The other thing we can do, when a crisis arises, is to go around each Department and ask them to divvy up and to make money available from their own funds, and that might mean not spending money on things that they had anticipated spending money on.

As I have said to the Assembly in the past, I am happy to look at whichever of those methods the Finance Committee and the Assembly think best. However, none is without its difficulties. It is a fact of life that we face unforeseen expenditure at times and we have to decide which is the best way of dealing with it. We have to have that debate, especially as the overcommitment option appears less attractive because we have not had the vast underspends in the past couple of years that we had under direct rule. At that time, let us not forget, we had underspends of up to 7%. That is not in anyone's interest. I hope I am not wrong in that; if so, I will stand corrected. Such underspends mean that we had planned to spend money on services, but we did not deliver on that. That is in the interest of no one in Northern Ireland.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister and I welcome the £15 million allocated to DRD for roads maintenance and the £5 million to DSD for housing renovation grants. Only £5 million is allocated to the Health Department, out of the £10 million already committed. The Minister knows well that there is an anticipated collective underspend by the health trusts this year of the order of £60 million, and no extra funding has been provided for that. That money will have to come out of the central health budget. Is the Minister not concerned at the serious loss of the health projects involved in that £60 million? Is he aware of the consequences of

that? It is effectively a cut of £60 million in certain parts of the health budget.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I, too, represent a constituency, and I can think of many things that I would love to spend money on in that constituency. The fact is that we must live within a budget. Members would like to spend money on many things in their constituencies, and there are many priorities that they would like to have pursued, but it is not always possible to do that. That is true of the Assembly, and it is true of us all individually.

There was a commitment to the Department of Health that it would have first call on £10 million of money that was available. Do not forget, there are ongoing issues in health anyway. The allocation was made on the basis that we would make £5 million available in this monitoring round and the Department would have first call on money available in the February monitoring round. The Executive took the decision that it was better to spread out the allocation like that, rather than hand it over in one bunch.

As to all the other issues that the Member has highlighted and is concerned about, I am sure that there is not a Member in the Assembly who could not raise an issue and ask whether I am not concerned that money is not being spent on this, that or the other, either in particular constituencies or in Northern Ireland as a whole, and make a good case for it. If that is the case, the first call must be for Departments to look at their priorities and resources and decide how they are going to spend their money, and if they feel that something is more important, they should prioritise it.

Neither I nor the Executive can magic money to facilitate every spending proposal. I believe that what I have presented to the Assembly today is a realistic picture of what we do with the money that has been surrendered and how we try to ensure that that is spread across a range of worthy bids.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton): I very much welcome the allocation of £5 million to the housing renovation grants scheme. The Social Development Committee has taken a keen interest in that over recent weeks and months. At a meeting six weeks ago, the Committee heard about late payments to contractors. Does the Minister know whether the allocation will be enough to ensure that all outstanding payments to contractors are made? Also, is he in a position to tell the House whether the Department for Social Development has met the commitment that it made in the June monitoring round to release an additional £20 million for Egan contract work?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As I said in my statement, the Department for Social

Development identified a £5 million pressure that it said had arisen because of unfunded opening commitments, the accelerated in-year expenditure on mandatory grants by contractors, and the necessity to issue a number of discretionary grants on an exceptional needs basis. It made a bid based on those issues, and £5 million has been paid to it.

Although we hear comments about raiding the housing budget, I have been able to allocate money to housing in almost every monitoring round. The Minister for Social Development was given £20 million in the June monitoring round on the basis that she immediately matched that with £20 million for the Egan contracts. In answer to the Member's question, that commitment has not been met to date. The Minister proposed to meet that commitment by using moneys that were surplus to requirements in the December monitoring round. The Member, as Chairperson of the Committee, and the Minister know that surplus requirements must be surrendered and that it is then up to the Executive to make a decision on that. After all, the Department was given that money on the basis that it would spend it for a specific purpose. If the money has not been spent for that purpose, the bid has not been fulfilled, and the money, therefore, comes back to the centre for discussion as to how it should be spent.

The Minister assumed that she could use that money. I gave the Minister and her Department every opportunity to explain whether they were simply moving that money around in a pro-active way, which I have allowed other Departments to do, and to make the case for that so that we could consider it. However, I did not receive any information on that. It is a discussion that I need to have with the Minister for Social Development, and I intend to do so some time this afternoon.

Mr Beggs: I also welcome the £5 million allocation to the Department of Health. Mr O'Loan indicated that pressures worth £60 million have landed on that Department and the trusts in this financial year. We have just experienced exceptionally cold weather that has created additional pressures because of fractures and other medical complications. Given that that £10 million commitment was made before the commencement of the financial year, why has the full amount yet to be allocated?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As I explained in a previous answer, the Executive's decision was that we will honour the commitment for the £10 million first call. Given the nature of the Health Department, I have no doubt that there will be further pressures between now and the end of the year. Therefore, rather than pay the £10 million all at once, it was deemed prudent to pay it in instalments. We do not know what pressures there may be in the run up to

the February monitoring round. An instalment has been paid, and the figure will be looked at again in the February monitoring round.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Paisley Jnr): The Minister mentioned the dioxins crisis that took place around this time last year. Will he indicate whether he will insist that some pressure be brought to bear on the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to resolve the outstanding £100,000 that is owed to Interfrigo Ltd for its management of the crisis for the Government? I hope that the Minister can find some release in that money.

I want to turn to the £15 million being made available to the DRD to increase the Roads Service budget. In the current climate — weather climate that is — we all recognise that additional money should be released to address the issue of gritting in rural Ulster. Is the Minister prepared to ensure that when the Department for Regional Development gets that extra £15 million, it will be able to find additional resources for gritting, and, in particular, for gritting rural roads? Otherwise, along with everything else, we will be slip-sliding all over the place, which is not in anyone's interest.

In his statement, the Minister said that the first priority of the Government is to protect the integrity of the Northern Ireland block. Removing my Committee chairman's cap, I want to ask whether the Minister has a message for savers in the Presbyterian Mutual Society (PMS) with regard to the protection of their integrity at the current time. Will the Minister give them any message of hope as that process goes into a new year?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I would not like to call my colleague a chancer. However, he chanced his arm on that one. He is allowed one question and he asked three. He is allowed to ask questions on my statement, which was on the December monitoring round, but he managed to bring the PMS into it. Let me quickly deal with the issues that he raised.

The money that is to be paid to the consultants is an issue for DETI and for the Department of Agriculture. I think that it is something probably best taken up with the Ministers of those Departments, and, of course, there is absolutely no reason why the Committees should not question Ministers on that.

As the Member is aware, the £15 million given to the DRD for roads maintenance is a capital commitment and the gritting of roads is revenue expenditure. Therefore, although I would love to be able to tell the Member that that £15 million will release money for the gritting of roads — and I know that there has been a considerable overspend by DRD as a result of the cold weather — it will not come from

that money. Like any other Department that has a pressure placed on it, DRD will either have to make a bid in the February monitoring round for the exceptional expenditure that it has had to undertake or find ways to move current expenditure around within its budget.

We are wandering off the statement. However, I want to give assurance on the situation regarding the PMS, because I know that that is an issue that concerns thousands of people across Northern Ireland. Every effort has been made by the Executive, from the First Minister and deputy First Minister, through to my Department and DETI, right down to departmental officials, and premium time has been spent on the issue. The Treasury, along with the administrator, is spending hours working to try to find a solution, to find a way through this, to identify a bank to deal with the situation and to try to reach a satisfactory conclusion on what is a very important issue. No stone will be left unturned. There are very sensitive issues that prevent me from providing a great deal of the detail of what is being done.

1.45 pm

On an almost weekly basis, the cynics attack this place and those of us who work in it. They say that the Assembly is dysfunctional and does not address the issues. Had there been no Assembly, no Executive and no local Administration, I doubt very much that there would have been a quarter of the effort that has been made to address this problem and a whole range of other problems that the press sometimes do not take up. Some of the issues that we have discussed this afternoon, in addition to the very important issues that the Member raised, highlight the importance of having a devolved Administration with local Ministers, local Committees and local representatives who keep up the pressure on the issues that constituents bring to their attention and want addressed.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr Boylan): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement.

The Environment Committee is very mindful of the financial pressure that the Department of the Environment faces and recognises that much of that is outside of the Department's direct control. However, that should be all the more reason for it to manage carefully those funds that are within its control. The Committee has asked several times about the finances involved in delivering the e-PIC project, and although many questions still remain, it will refrain from delving into those until the Public Accounts Committee delivers its report.

Why do the figures supplied to the Committee by the Department of the Environment indicate a 44% reduction in planning applications over the past five

years but a 3% overall increase in the number of Planning Service staff during the same period?

I take this opportunity to thank the Minister for the £15 million allocation to DRD. Will he indicate whether that will be used for road safety, which would be most welcome?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will answer the last question first. Any roads maintenance that improves the surfaces of roads is bound to make them safer. I see roads maintenance and road safety as inextricably linked. If there are potholes and bad surfaces on roads, accidents are more likely to happen. Therefore, the £15 million for roads maintenance should have the dual effect of improving the quality of the roads on which people drive and improving safety on them.

With regard to the expenditure on the Planning Service, I am sure that the Member is happy that the necessary money has been made available for the e-PIC project. That in itself should bring substantial benefits to the Planning Service, because the whole idea behind the computerisation of planning applications was to make it easier for people to access and lodge their applications and to check their progress, and for the initial validation of applications to be completed without a lot of administrative work. All of that should free up professional planners' time and reduce the time spent dealing with queries.

The levels of staffing and the reduction in the number of planning applications are matters that the Member will need to take up with the Minister, through the Committee. However, there will not be an immediate correlation between the fall in planning applications and the number of staff in the Planning Service. During the boom time, the backlog of planning applications was very long, and the Planning Service still has to work its way through that. During the boom in planning applications, a lot of staff were moved from other areas, such as development control and area planning, to deal with the backlog. That work still needs to be done.

Therefore, it is not simply the case that if planning applications go down, the number of staff should be reduced. However, I am no longer the Minister of the Environment. Those questions are probably better addressed to him.

Mr Attwood: I agree with the Minister that devolution is better than London rule. However, people should not diminish the fact that many hopes have been frustrated and many opportunities lost during this phase of devolution, as was the case during the previous phase of devolution.

I agree that there is a pattern in the monitoring returns of money going to DSD. That is a welcome pattern that began in January 2009 when the then

Finance Minister, in a letter to the Minister for Social Development, shifted ground in respect of arguments around the funding of DSD and, in particular, housing. That pattern reveals the need to put housing and DSD issues on a secure financial footing. There is a reason why there is a pattern of allocations —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member come to the question?

Mr Attwood: David Cameron said yesterday that, in the event of a Tory Government after the election, there would be an emergency Budget within 50 days. Given that, and given that it appears that, last week, Alistair Darling won a strategic argument with the Prime Minister, have the Minister or his officials received any information from the Treasury in London about what it wants him to do in advance of an election later this year to prepare for the consequences of that election?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member raises an important point that I suspect might be more relevant to the statement that I will make tomorrow. He may have the chance to ask the question again tomorrow when I talk about the Budget for 2010-11.

However, he has raised an important issue. If it is difficult to deal with the pressures that arise through in-year monitoring, a Budget within 50 days of an election, which will presumably be in May, could leave us having to find substantial savings after Departments have made their plans for 2010-11. That could make the bids in some monitoring rounds look like chicken feed compared to what we might suddenly face in the middle of the next financial year.

I have met the Treasury Minister in London. Moreover, I have spoken to, and will seek further meetings with, the spokesman for the Conservative Party. So far, there has been no indication of what the next CSR period will bring. We received some indication about the size of the reductions before the Chancellor used the current, more strident language. There have been substantial reductions in the capital budget that has been announced for 2011-14. I cannot remember the figure off the top of my head; I think that it is 6.7%, but I could be wrong. I will come back to the Member with the exact figure. That will have fairly severe implications, perhaps more so in Northern Ireland.

The Member raises an important point: we are at the mercy of people who, for clear reasons, given that an election is coming up, will probably not reveal their true hand. However, they have given us a flavour of what we can expect some time in the first quarter of the next financial year.

Mrs M Bradley: The Minister said that he has already given extra money to the Department of

Health. I ask him to give more. Older people in the community are not getting the care that they need because of the money shortages. We tell them that they are included in the Programme for Government, and we have committed to that programme. However, we have not fulfilled our duties. The spell of bad weather has further highlighted the fact that older people are not getting the care that they need, when they need it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member come to the question?

Mrs M Bradley: They sometimes suffer because of the weather but never receive the care that they need. We need to give them confidence in this Government through providing proper care. I ask the Minister to consider giving extra money.

I know that the Health budget is stretched, but if the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety got more money, he would be more than willing to carry out a programme.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No matter how much more money I gave to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I suspect that he would still come back asking for more. I listened to what the Member said, and although many people will have sympathy for her points, one element is missing. If she wants more money for health, will she and her party indicate where that money will come from?

The Member who spoke before Mrs Bradley said that it is right to give more money to housing. Mrs Bradley wants more money for health, and other Members want more money for roads and education. We could start to manufacture money in the printing presses in the basement of this Building, but that would not do us much good. The Member and her party believe that health should be a priority, and that is laudable. However, in order to have some realism in the debate and to know what the real choices are, the Member should, perhaps, tell us who will receive less money if there is to be more money for health.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Video Recordings Bill

Legislative Consent Motion

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McCausland): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the Video Recordings Bill.

This is a short Bill that will repeal and revive certain provisions of the Video Recordings Act 1984. The Bill is needed because it has recently come to light that penalties for offences under that Act are unenforceable. That is due to a failure to notify certain provisions in the 1984 Act and the labelling regulations that were made under it to the European Commission under the European Union's technical standards directive. The aim of the Video Recordings Bill is to rectify that situation.

The Video Recordings Act 1984 introduced a system of classification for video films and some video games. It created a series of offences concerning the supply of classified videos and video games to persons under certain ages. The 1984 Act also contains offences concerning the supply of unclassified material. The Act requires that videos, DVDs and certain boxed video games would be classified by the British Board of Film Classification. It makes it illegal to supply unclassified material and to supply age-restricted material to people below the specified age rating. It also limits distribution of adult films material.

Video and film classification is a transferred matter, because it is not listed in schedules 2 or 3 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The criminal law, and the creation of offences and penalties, remains expressly reserved under paragraph 9 of schedule 3 to the 1998 Act until the devolution of policing and criminal justice matters takes place. Without the repeal and revival of the Video Recordings Act 1984, the penalties for offences under that Act are unenforceable, and we are unable to protect the public and our children from the distribution of inappropriate and offensive material.

When passed, the Video Recordings Bill will come into force and will become the Video Recordings Act 2010. It will extend to England, Wales and Scotland, and, if the Assembly agrees to the legislative consent motion, it will extend to Northern Ireland. Consent for Northern Ireland's inclusion in the Bill has been sought from the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure and from the Executive.

Both have given their consent to proceed with the proposed Bill. The Assembly must now consider the principle of extending the Bill to Northern Ireland. We need a united approach to video and film classification across the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland,

and to the matter of criminal offences and penalties, as well as the enforcement mechanism for those offences.

2.00 pm

Our children and vulnerable adults must be protected. I hope that Members will agree and support the motion, which has been designed to allow a parallel timetable for delivery and to ensure that the legislation continues to be consistent across the United Kingdom.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé ag caint ar son an Choiste Cultúir, Ealaíon agus Fóillíochta, agus tá muidinne, mar Choiste, ag tabhairt tacaíochta don rún seo.

The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure considered the legislative consent motion on the Video Recordings Bill at its meeting on 3 December 2009. The Committee had been briefed by departmental officials on the implications of the Bill three weeks earlier on 12 November 2009.

The Committee agreed, on a without-prejudice basis, to support the motion, which will see the extension of the provisions of the Video Recordings Bill to this region. The Committee understands that the purpose of the Bill is straightforward, as the Minister outlined. Its purpose is to repeal and revive the existing provisions of the Video Recordings Act 1984 in order to make the criminal offences in that Act enforceable. That will mean that proper public protections are in place around the supply and classification of age-related films and video games. The Committee welcomes that move and the positive implications for protecting children and young people.

The Committee welcomes the extension of the provisions of the Video Recordings Bill to this region, and I commend the motion to the House.

Lord Browne: I support the motion that the application of the provisions of the Video Recordings Bill be extended to Northern Ireland. The subject matter of the Bill is not controversial as it is substantially a re-enactment of existing legislation, and there are no cost implications for Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the system of classification for video films and video games is of the utmost importance. Therefore, the changes proposed in the Digital Economy Bill [HL] need very careful consideration. I will comment on that in more detail when that motion is discussed.

I support the legislative consent motion.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for moving the legislative consent motion today. It deals with a rather peculiar piece of legislation that is currently being fast-tracked through another place. The Bill is a simple piece of legislation consisting of two clauses and one schedule. Clause 1 repeals the provisions of

the Video Recordings Act and immediately revives them. Clause 2 refers simply to the short title of the Bill, its commencement and extent.

The 1984 Act introduced a system for classifying video films and some video games according to their content, as well as a series of offences for supplying classified videos and video games to people under an age restriction. The Act was an innovative and welcome piece of legislation, as it stopped certain videos with extreme content from receiving a classification and made it an offence to supply unclassified material.

The 1984 Act was introduced by a private Member, and it appears that, in consideration of the Digital Economy Bill [HL], which we will address later, the Government discovered that the Act was no longer enforceable under UK law. My understanding is that the situation arose because of a procedural failure in 1984 to notify the European Commission of the Act's provision in draft under the technical standards directive. That means that no new prosecutions can be made under that Act and prosecutors cannot oppose appeals made in time against conviction. As the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport outlined recently, it means that:

“publishers of videos, DVDs and 18-rated and R18-rated video games can distribute their goods free of any classification restrictions. Retailers can sell classified and unclassified adult material to any person, regardless of age, with limited statutory powers to stop or prosecute them.”

The Video Recordings Bill is designed to make the 1984 Video Recordings Act enforceable again as soon as possible. Therefore, my party fully supports the legislative consent motion. However, I ask the Minister to clarify the situation as regards the distribution of previously illegal material in Northern Ireland during the period of the legal loophole. What assurances has the Minister received from his London counterpart that past convictions will not be challengeable due to the scenario that the Bill attempts to address?

Mr P J Bradley: When I was growing up in a rural homestead and switching on a wireless powered by the dry battery and the wet battery, I never thought that, one day, I would be talking about digital radios and digital this and that. I apologise that I arrived late for the Minister's statement —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the Member that the legislative consent motion does not concern digital radio. It is about the Video Recordings Bill.

Mr P J Bradley: I apologise if I confused you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Given that the endorsement sought is quite straightforward and that the Bill is relatively short, there is little that I can add to the comments that were made by the Chairperson of the Committee and the three or four other Members who spoke. I support

the Bill, and I thank other Members for saying what I might have said had I been here earlier.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I support the motion on behalf of the Alliance Party. I concur fully with the comments that were made by the Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, Barry McElduff. The memorandum outlines why the Video Recordings Bill should be extended to Northern Ireland. The fact that offences committed under the 1984 Act were unenforceable because of a failure of certain provisions of the Act and the regulations under the technical standards directive is a very good reason for the House to support the motion.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Members for their contributions and support for the proposal. The Video Recordings Act dates back to 1984, but it was only in August 2009 that it became known and recognised that there was a technical difficulty surrounding its enforcement. All that we are doing today is pursuing regularisation of the situation.

A question was asked about people who have been prosecuted under the Act already. I am informed that a small number of cases have been appealed, but Members will appreciate that no one can comment on cases that are ongoing. I am also informed that it is not likely that people prosecuted previously will be able to overturn their convictions or receive any financial recompense. Similarly, it is unlikely that any loss-of-trade claims will succeed. I am further informed that a relatively small number of people were prosecuted under the Act as a result of its deterrent powers. Many prosecutions under the Act have also been made in conjunction with prosecutions for other offences. Therefore, I hope that the House will give its consent to us proceeding on the matter.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the Video Recordings Bill.

Digital Economy Bill [HL]: Legislative Consent Motion

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McCausland): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Digital Economy Bill dealing with the classification of video games etc and public lending right.

I remind Members of the Video Recordings Bill legislative consent motion, which they have just supported, because the two motions are closely related. I also express gratitude to my Executive colleagues and to the Chairperson and members of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure for the expeditious manner in which they considered the proposals to bring both motions before the Assembly.

Before dealing in detail with the transferred matters, I will provide a brief overview of the Digital Economy Bill [HL]. In June 2006, the ‘Digital Britain’ White Paper was published. It aims to put in place systems to develop the digital world and protect users of digital technology. It is hoped that the proposals will secure the United Kingdom’s position as one of the world’s leading digital knowledge economies.

The ‘Digital Britain’ paper includes a wide range of proposals to achieve that aim. From new Internet services, modernisation of radio broadcasting and new ideas on how we receive TV news and current affairs programming, it is likely that we will all be affected by the proposed changes. I am determined that any changes will be appropriate for Northern Ireland, and I continue to negotiate with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on some of the issues. However, the motion that I ask the House to endorse today concerns legislative elements of ‘Digital Britain’ that I fully endorse. Those elements will be put on to a statutory footing by the Digital Economy Bill [HL].

The Bill is comprehensive. For the most part, it will extend automatically to England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. However, it contains certain provisions that are transferred matters for Northern Ireland. The transferred matters relate to clauses 40, 41 and 44 of and schedule 1 to the Bill. They concern strengthening video games classification to protect users of video games and broadening library lending rights to include digital media.

Earlier today, the Assembly supported the Video Recordings Bill legislative consent motion, which relates to the repeal and revival of the Video Recordings Act 1984. The Digital Economy Bill [HL] seeks to expand and enhance the provisions of the Video Recordings Act 1984 once it has been revived. Essentially, it will mean that anyone who sells games that are classified as 12-plus to small children can be

prosecuted. The Video Recordings Act 1984 already gives 18-plus games a statutory footing.

Clauses 40 and 41 of and schedule 1 to the Digital Economy Bill [HL] set out, among other things, the criteria that must be satisfied for a game to be an exempted work under the 1984 Act. In addition, the Secretary of State would have the power to update the criteria and to add or remove further criteria for exempted video games. That will be done through regulations and will, of course, be subject to parliamentary scrutiny. There will also be a power to designate two different authorities under section 4 of the 1984 Act. That will allow the Video Standards Council to take on the responsibility for classifying video games by using an enhanced Pan-European Game Information (PEGI) system.

Video and film classification is a transferred matter because it is not listed in either schedule 2 or schedule 3 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The second transferred matter for Northern Ireland in the Bill is the public lending right. That relates to the Public Lending Right Act 1979, which provides for compensatory payments to authors and arrangements for the free loan of their books through public libraries. That Act refers only to books and, therefore, excludes other formats, such as audiobooks and e-books. Clause 44 of the Digital Economy Bill [HL] would amend that Act and the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to allow the inclusion of some non-print formats in the public lending rights payment regime.

When passed, the Digital Economy Bill [HL] will come into force as the Digital Economy Act 2010. If the Assembly agrees to the legislative consent motion, all the Bill's provisions will extend to Northern Ireland, including those that would do so automatically and those that are transferred matters.

Consent for Northern Ireland's transferred matters to be included in the Bill has been sought from the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Executive. Both have given their consent to proceed with the Bill.

2.15 pm

We need a united approach across Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom in regard to video and film classification. Digital technology is advancing at an amazing pace. Our legislation must keep up so that we can protect our children and vulnerable adults. I also believe that there needs to be a united approach to the public lending right provision, to assist our libraries in providing the most modern and efficient services demanded by the public. I hope that Members agree with me and that they will support the motion, which has been designed to allow a parallel timetable for delivery and to ensure that the legislation in respect

of those matters continues to be consistent across the United Kingdom.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): I again speak on behalf of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, which considered the legislative consent motion relating to the Digital Economy Bill [HL] at its meeting on 10 December 2009. The Committee had been briefed by departmental officials on the implications of the Bill on 12 November 2009. The Committee agreed to support the motion, which will see the extension of the provisions of the Digital Economy Bill [HL] to this region.

Two aspects of the Bill relate to transferred matters and are the bases of the need for the legislative consent motion. The first matter concerns the classification of video games. The Bill will ensure that all video games are appropriately age-classified. That is welcomed by the Committee, because it will help to protect children from the risks sometimes associated with viewing video games with inappropriate content for their target age group.

The other aspect of the Bill concerns the public lending right. It will mean that authors will receive proper payment for loans of their books from public libraries, including audio and e-books. The Committee welcomes that move. It believes that it is important that all those working in the arts sector — in this case, authors and writers — should be supported, given their contribution to society.

The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure welcomes the extension of the Digital Economy Bill [HL] to this region, and I commend the motion to the House.

Lord Browne: I fully support the motion that the provisions of the Digital Economy Bill [HL] dealing with classification of video games and public lending rights should be extended to Northern Ireland.

As I stated when supporting the legislative consent motion on the Video Recordings Bill, I strongly believe that an effective system for classification of video games in Northern Ireland is essential. Members will be aware that the Bill, which was introduced in the House of Lords on 19 November 2009, seeks to reform the classification rules in the light of a recent assessment of the risks that children face from the Internet and from playing video games.

Recent studies have shown that parents should be most concerned about two factors: first, the amount of time that children spend playing games and, secondly, the content of video games that they play. The extent of children's engagement with video games correlates clearly with health risk factors, including obesity, and with poorer academic performance. Perhaps even more importantly, when some video games are analysed for

violent content, additional risk factors are observed for aggressive behaviour and desensitisation to violence. Playing violent games leads to increased physiological arousal and aggressive thoughts, feelings and behaviour as well as decreased co-operative attitudes.

I strongly support the Bill's proposals to distinguish clearly between exempted games that are suitable for children under 12 or that are designed to inform or educate and other games that will be subject to classification, because that will ensure that vulnerable children are not exposed to violent or other inappropriate material.

No doubt, suitable arrangements for the operation of the proposed new system will be agreed after the Bill has been fully scrutinised at all its stages in Westminster and before it becomes law.

I am confident that the system will not unduly restrict the positive benefits that children undoubtedly gain from playing many games. Due to the interactive nature of some games, children find them highly motivating and become actively engaged with them. As a result, those games often successfully impart the attitudes, skills and behaviours that they are designed to teach. In fact, members of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure may be interested to learn that a study has shown that playing a golf video game improves putting control on the course.

It is important that the public lending right, which is a transferred matter, is included so that Northern Ireland libraries are not at a disadvantage to their counterparts in Great Britain in the range of services and products that they are able to offer. Therefore, Mr Deputy Speaker, I support the motion.

Mr K Robinson: The Ulster Unionist Party supports the legislative consent motion. Members who spoke previously, including the Minister, said that the Digital Economy Bill [HL] will deal with a wide range of matters that will bring us back to the mainstream of the expansion of that type of media across Great Britain. However, in the midst of his statement, the Minister said that he would look at something that was appropriate to Northern Ireland. I wonder whether we have missed something, because we thought that we were covering all the UK-wide matters and, I presume, all the matters that the Republic of Ireland has already covered under European legislation. Is something causing the Minister concern? Apart from that issue, the Ulster Unionist Party is happy to support and give its consent to the Bill.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for tabling the motion, and I thank the Chairman of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure for his summary. I had prepared notes; however, given that the clock is ticking, I will select a few points to make.

It is proper that we welcome the measures in the Bill that meet parents' needs. We should also welcome the protective measures that ensure that all video games, in whatever format they are sold or supplied, will be clearly age-classified. The in-built protection for all age groups, particularly the strict legislation that protects children under the age of 12, is to be welcomed. On behalf of the SDLP, I join other Members in supporting the motion.

Dr Farry: Like other parties, the Alliance Party supports the aspects of the Bill that relate to Northern Ireland. The legislation is important for ensuring that the UK as a whole, and Northern Ireland as part of the UK, has a competitive economy, particularly in the growing aspects of the digital electronic future upon which we are so dependent.

Bearing in mind the specific parts of the Bill that relate to Northern Ireland, like other Members, I see the benefits of video games. The way that young people want to spend their time shows that the world has moved on from when I was growing up. There are dangers with gaming being a solitary activity that consumes a lot of time. Equally, people can interact with one another, either in one location or elsewhere in these islands or around the world. Indeed, such interaction is to be encouraged. Nevertheless, parents demand proper safeguards to ensure that their children play games that are suitable to them. Parents also demand that those safeguards are not abused. That aspect of the Bill is welcome.

Facilitating local libraries with the public lending right is a well accepted point. We will probably have to consider some issues that arise, such as out-of-copyright works that are issued electronically. Members will be aware of the wider debate about whether it would be advantageous for one of the Internet websites — I cannot remember whether it is Amazon or Google — to place out-of-copyright works online and, in effect, own the copyright. Although that may bring the works in question to a greater audience, it may impinge the tradition of open access to non-copyrighted works.

Furthermore, the Internet has developed in an anarchic way, which has been its strength. However, as things such as digital legislation become mainstream, it is important that we do not lose the spontaneity of the Internet through over-onerous rules in respect of people sharing extracts of books or articles that they have come on for purely domestic or one-to-one non-commercial purposes. It is important that we are not overly onerous on the issue.

The local broadcasting element affects Northern Ireland. Although it is a reserved matter and is not devolved, there is a strong groundswell of support to ensure that we retain proper local broadcasting in

Northern Ireland. That preservation is more important in this region than in any other region of the UK. It is important that the Department uses all its opportunities to lobby the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in Westminster to ensure that our interests in local broadcasting are protected.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I will endeavour to be as brief as possible because it is clear that all parties support the legislative consent motion. I want to provide clarification on Ken Robinson's point. I was simply saying that important aspects of 'Digital Britain' are not covered by the Bill, and we want to ensure that Northern Ireland gets the best arrangement. I am sure that the Member is well aware of the sort of issue that I am speaking about.

A point was raised about video classification. I assure Members that I believe firmly that the move towards the PEGI system is the best method for enforcement and for the protection of young people. Evidence and research conclude that that is the right direction. Age ratings will become compulsory for all boxed games designed for people who are aged 12 and over, and the Bill will protect our children by making it illegal to sell boxed computer games that are suitable for 12-year-olds and older to underage children. It will also ensure that consumers, businesses and our online infrastructure are kept safe by granting reserved powers concerning domain name registries. Therefore, there will be enhanced protection through the Bill.

Dr Farry is right to draw attention to the importance of getting the best arrangements for local broadcasting in Northern Ireland. In some ways, that relates to the issue that Ken Robinson raised earlier. I hope that the House will support the legislative consent motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Digital Economy Bill [HL] dealing with the classification of video games etc and public lending right.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Designation of Acting First Minister

Mr Speaker: I am conscious that we are proceeding to Question Time, but it is important that I share with you a letter that I have just received from the First Minister. I wish to inform the House that I have received written notice from the First Minister, Peter Robinson, that, under section 16A(11) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, he has designated Mrs Arlene Foster, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, to exercise the functions of the office of First Minister. The designation takes immediate effect.

I appreciate that Members will wish to consider the announcement that I have made this afternoon. Therefore, I have decided to call all the Whips together very quickly to try to clear up any issue that parties may have in respect of the announcement. As I said, we are about to move to Question Time, and I am not going to take any points of order.

I am happy to meet party Whips this afternoon and to come back to the House if there is any real issue that Members feel still needs to be answered. I ask the House to take its ease in advance of Question Time.

2.30 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Weather-related Injuries

1. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an estimate of the cost to the Health Service of the treatment of injuries caused by falls due to freezing weather conditions during the month of December. (AQO 532/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): It is not yet possible to give an accurate assessment of the cost to the Health Service of treating injuries from falls that occurred as a result of the freezing weather conditions in December 2009. The vast majority of patients will be treated in A&E departments. However, many people will also be treated or will have continuing care provided to them in outpatients departments, or by primary community and personal social services.

I am aware that during the week leading up to Christmas, there was a 31% increase in the number of people who were admitted to hospital with fractures compared with the same period in 2008. In addition, the Ambulance Service reports a 16% increase in call-outs related to falls compared with the figure for December 2008. Naturally, all of that brings additional cost to an already pressured Health Service.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for his answer. Although the gritting of footpaths is not his Department's responsibility, will he tell the House whether any joined-up thinking took place between his Department and others on the matter? All Members' constituency offices have received a considerable number of complaints and reports about people having fallen on treacherous footpaths during the hard winter of December. The Minister has told the House that there has been a 31% increase in the number of incidents being reported. Will he tell the House the extent of the further pressure that will be put on his budget as a result of the bad weather?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I said in my answer to the substantive question, it is too early for the Department to provide an accurate assessment of cost. However,

there has been a marked increase in the number of patients going through fracture clinics. That has meant that hospitals' elective-care services have had to be discontinued temporarily. At the weekend, all trusts did extra work, and they will continue to do so during the coming week in an effort to catch up.

All of that creates costs, and such costs afflict the Health Service annually. Every year, the Health Service experiences such a surge. In recent weeks, the surge has been particularly severe. Credit must be given to staff in fracture units who deal with those injuries and to the hard-working ambulance crews who go out in adverse weather and deal with the increased number of call-outs. The service is under pressure, but it has coped and continues to do so. All credit must go to the workers who provide that service.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that they must stand in their place if they wish to ask supplementary questions, and those questions must be kept short and relevant to the original question.

Mr Gallagher: I am sure that all Members want to congratulate health workers, particularly staff at sites that are under pressure due to the severe weather. The Minister said that certain other patients have had their treatment or appointments postponed. Can he tell the House whether all people who turned up at A&E departments with injuries that resulted from the severe weather were able to be facilitated and treated?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Yes, I can confirm that A&E departments continue to function, and are doing so extremely well. We have targets for patients to be seen within a particular time and, as the Member is aware, the A&E target is four hours. By and large, A&E departments manage to adhere closely to that target. However, during periods of surge, such as has been reported, it is difficult to reach that target exactly. Nevertheless, the vast majority of patients were seen within that four hour target. As an example, admissions for patients with a broken hip increased by 48% during the last week in December, which is a marked increase on what we would normally anticipate.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister has referred to elective surgery. Obviously, due to the increase in the number of people falling, etc, orthopaedic consultations have also been affected. Will the Minister give us some idea of how the planned waiting lists have been affected, the extent to which they have been affected, and how it is planned to remedy that? I am sure that the Minister is aware that people on orthopaedic waiting lists wait a long time for a consultation.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The fractures target is that, where clinically appropriate, 95% of patients wait no longer

than 48 hours. That target has slipped, but we have got very close to it across all the hospitals that operate fracture clinics. I can confirm that cancelled operations affect 109 patients. The trusts worked extra shifts and held extra clinics last weekend and will do the same this week in order to deal with that backlog.

By and large, the system has worked well and the staff have coped well, albeit with the pressure of extra work, and all credit to them. The fact that we are getting close to our target of seeing fracture patients within 48 hours is a credit to them. As a result, patients benefit from not having to wait on trolleys in A&E for days, as happened in previous years. That demonstrates that the investment that has gone into waiting times and targets has resulted in better patient care.

Swine Flu Vaccination

2. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what caused the breakdown in negotiations with the British Medical Association in relation to providing the swine flu vaccination to children under five years. (AQO 533/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: General practitioners delivered the swine flu vaccination programme to a significant proportion of priority patients in at-risk groups, and I am indebted to their clinical commitment in providing that valuable service. It was, therefore, my wish that phase two of the vaccination programme would also be delivered predominately by GPs. The four UK Health Ministers agreed on an offer to be put to the General Practitioners Committee of the BMA in respect of vaccinating children under five years of age. The fee offered was that agreed for vaccinating patients in the at-risk groups during phase one of the vaccination programme.

In negotiations, the BMA confirmed that it could not accept the offer made on behalf of the four UK health administrations. In the absence of an agreed national deal, the four UK Health Ministers have determined that the vaccination of the under fives will be delivered through local arrangements with willing GP practices and trusts. I assure the Northern Ireland public, and parents of young children in particular, that the vaccine will be available to all children over six months and under five years of age.

Ms S Ramsey: I am disappointed that, going into phase two of the vaccination programme against swine flu, it seems that negotiations broke down over money. I appreciate the work carried out by local people in trying to tackle swine flu, and that should not be ignored. On 17 December 2009, I asked the Minister for a breakdown of how much of the £64 million committed to tackling swine flu had been paid to GPs.

Elected representatives and the general public have a right to know how much of that £64 million is being paid directly to GPs, so that we can break down exactly where the money is going.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: By and large, the swine flu vaccination programme continues to be delivered through GP practices in Northern Ireland. There are 360 practices in Northern Ireland and, to date, almost 300 have signed up to deliver the vaccine. Where necessary, trusts are also in a position to deal with patients who are not part of a practice that is signed up to deliver the vaccine.

As far as the breakdown of the cost of swine flu vaccination is concerned, I have figures in front of me for the cost of the vaccine roll-out. The cost of each vaccination is £5.25 per patient, and the total cost of the vaccination programme is £2.07 million. In addition, some concessions have been made on the achievement of the patient-experience targets for one year to allow GPs to carry out the extra work involved. I can check the figures, and I am happy to share them with the House. It was difficult for me to say exactly what the total cost would be until we were certain that the cost per vaccine would be £5.25. However, that has been the cost for the priority groups to date, and that continues to be the price of the vaccine. I can also add that that rate is below the rate for the seasonal flu vaccine.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will the Minister confirm what the uptake levels have been for groups other than the under-five age group? Have there been any regional disparities across the North?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There has been a very strong uptake in Northern Ireland. The Department deals with Northern Ireland as a region, so I cannot break the uptake down any further than that at the moment. However, there has been a very good uptake in Northern Ireland, which has been much higher than the uptake in other parts of the UK. That high uptake is across all groups including, for example, pregnant women. There was some resistance to vaccination among that group of patients on the mainland, but we have performed very well in our area of responsibility.

Antrim Area Hospital

3. **Dr W McCrea** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the closure of surgical beds at the Mid-Ulster Hospital, what action has been taken to ensure that Antrim Area Hospital is in a position to cope with an additional intake of patients. (AQO 534/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The consolidation of acute inpatient surgery services at the Antrim Area Hospital and the Causeway Hospital in November 2009 was made in the interests of patient safety and to ensure that we can provide the highest possible quality of safe and sustainable services into the future. Prior to the changes being made in November, typically fewer than two admissions each day to the Mid-Ulster Hospital required a surgical intervention. I am advised that the trust is managing the increased flow of surgical patients to the Antrim Area Hospital through the provision of additional beds to support the extra surgical activity.

Dr W McCrea: The Minister will be aware of a report in the newspapers from a doctor, a local GP and also a consultant, concerning the situation in our hospitals. The report suggested that patients are lying on trolleys for hours on end, that there is a lack of nursing staff to attend those patients and that existing staff are overworked. Surely sufficient preparation was not made when the Minister decided to remove acute services from the Mid-Ulster and Whiteabbey hospitals.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I think that we may be confusing two issues. On average, fewer than two admissions to the Mid-Ulster Hospital each day required surgical intervention, and the Antrim Area and Causeway hospitals are the two hospitals that will now take surgical admissions. The Department has deployed extra beds to deal with that change. It has increased the number of surgical beds from 55 to 67 and has made capacity for up to eight outlier medical beds to deal with any surge.

The problem with Antrim Area Hospital was that there was a surge in business, which was related not least to winter weather and the associated issues of falls, accidents and older people becoming ill and requiring hospital support as a result of the weather.

I am not aware of people waiting for days and days on trolleys. *[Interruption.]* I beg your pardon. I read a report from a doctor that referred to sub-Saharan conditions in the Antrim Area Hospital. Shame on him for making that sort of remark. If he had any idea what a sub-Saharan hospital was like, he would not be talking about Antrim Area Hospital in that way.

2.45 pm

We have had a cold snap and there has been a surge, but staff have coped extremely well, although they remain under pressure and will continue to remain under pressure without the sort of investment into our various facilities that I have argued for in the House on a number of occasions. That investment is lacking at present. For example, the intake per annum at Antrim Area Hospital A&E is now running at over 60,000,

whereas it was designed for around 35,000 per annum. We would like to build a better and extended accident and emergency unit in Antrim Area Hospital, but without the capital we are unable to do so. I have a limited budget to deal with the business that we are doing. I keep telling the House that business is up and demand is up in the Health Service in Northern Ireland by 9% in the year that has just passed, and it was up by 12% the year before. That gives some indication of where the Health Service is going.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister tell us how many extra doctors and nurses have been brought into Antrim Area Hospital to help with the added pressures from the Mid-Ulster Hospital and Whiteabbey Hospital and the problem caused by the recent cold weather?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I will not recap all that I have just said, but I am happy to write to the Member about details on staffing levels. By and large, the overflow from Whiteabbey Hospital would go to the Mater Hospital in Belfast, and that from the Mid-Ulster Hospital would go to either Antrim Area Hospital or the Causeway Hospital. As I said, there are typically fewer than two admissions to Mid-Ulster Hospital requiring surgical intervention each day. That gives an indication of the flow we are talking about. There is provision for staff to be redeployed, not only within hospitals but also to Antrim Area Hospital and the Causeway Hospital.

Mr Ford: I welcome the tribute that the Minister has paid to the staff of Antrim Area Hospital and the work they are doing, not least in A&E, and not least what was done by A&E staff on Friday morning in most tragic circumstances. Does the Minister accept that there has been underfunding of the Northern Trust area over a consistent period of many years, and that his references to what the Department will seek to do are actually a measure of what it has failed to do so far for the people who live in the Northern Trust area?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I do not think we can divorce the Northern Trust from other parts of Northern Ireland. As I have explained in the House on a number of occasions, the Health Service in Northern Ireland is seriously underfunded. For example, spend on health in the UK as a percentage of GDP is less than the European average, and the European average is much less than that of the United States, so we are in a region in the UK that has the lowest rate of spend. We are the poor relation of the poor relation when it comes to health. I have explained that over and over again, yet Members appear to be unwilling to take the required action and increase support and resources for the Health Service.

As far as the Northern Trust is concerned, I am bound by the capital budget that I have. My

Department bid for capital and got about half of what it needed. The Northern Trust capital over the period is £175 million, I have been allocated £29 million over the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, and the ward block that we plan for the Antrim Area Hospital will cost £51 million. That is in the plans, and has been given the go ahead. There will also be £3 million spent on Antrim Area Hospital A&E. Those investments are coming forward, but they could come forward faster, and they are insufficient; we need more. However, that is not in my hands, but in the hands of the House.

DHSSPS Budget 2010-11

4. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on his departmental budget for 2010-11. (AQO 535/10)

DHSSPS Budget 2008-2011

14. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on his departmental budget for the period 2008-2011. (AQO 545/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 14 together. My Department is currently engaging with health and social care organisations to determine the revenue requirements for 2010-11. Once the Executive decision and final Budget have been voted on, I will be in a position to share with Members the details of the funding available.

Trusts will face significant challenges in 2010-11 because of the need to make £700 million of efficiencies over three years. On top of that, there is a £600 million shortfall in funding to cover the health needs of Northern Ireland compared with those of England, the ongoing impact of swine flu and increased demand for services, particularly among the ageing older population.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Minister for his answer, and I am grateful to him, to other ministerial colleagues of his and to Members for their recent expressions of condolence after the death of my father. Does the Minister agree that any attempt by the DUP Minister of Finance and Personnel to cut health funding in next year's Budget will be totally unacceptable? Given that next year's Budget problems were essentially made and created by the DUP and Sinn Féin, is it not incumbent on the DUP to cut the deficit but not healthcare funding?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: We must wait with bated breath for the

Minister of Finance and Personnel's announcement. Healthcare cannot take any more cuts, but we will have to wait and see, because some parties have expressed a willingness to accept cuts to the health budget, as they also accept the £700 million of efficiencies that are to come out of the Department.

The fact is that the health budget is hopelessly inadequate. Professor Appleby conducted an efficiency exercise, and the Health Service has acted on all his conclusions and recommendations bar one, which was his key recommendation that the health budget should rise by 4.3% in real terms, year on year, from 2007 to 2012. This year, the health budget has risen by 0.5% on the back of an increase in demand of 9%. That gives an indication of where we are on health spending, bringing to mind the old adage that one should beware of what one wishes for. Some Members chose to vote to accept cuts, and I will have to wait until tomorrow to see the extent of those cuts. If the figures are what I understand them to be, Members will be deeply unhappy.

Mr Kinahan: The Minister has touched on the subject many times, and we know that demand has increased by some 20% in the past two years. The Minister will agree that it would be highly irresponsible of the DUP Minister of Finance and Personnel to cut health funding. To what figure, in real terms, does an increased requirement of 4.3% equate?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Next year's revenue budget for health is £4.2 billion. That requires a 4.3% rise, and the recommended 4.3% rises have never been acted on. A number of people, including our financial friends, have estimated that it would require an extra £600 million to provide a Health Service for Northern Ireland that is comparable with that in England. Children's services are underfunded by 30% compared with England, mental health services are underfunded to the tune of 25% and extra funding is required for older people's services because the demographics are firmly against us owing to the fact that, thankfully, life expectancy is rising all the time. The older population is increasing, and it needs and deserves to be looked after, but the funding is not available for that to happen.

All of that means that the health budget is being squeezed. When patients come to a hospital or a doctor's surgery, they are asked what can be done to help them rather than whether they can pay for it. As that demand expands and the resource to meet it does not expand, the activity will become, by definition, inadequate. That results in waiting lists, longer waiting times and a number of steps that people will find unacceptable. We must wait to hear the good news from the Minister of Finance and Personnel tomorrow.

Mr O’Loan: I wonder what the Conservative partners of the Ulster Unionist Party would make of the questions and answers so far. A number of trusts indicated that they will have substantial overspends at the end of the financial year. The collective figure is approximately £60 million. Much of that overspend seems to be structural in nature, and, therefore, it cannot be tackled through short-term efficiency savings any more than it can through the efficiency savings that are already in place. Therefore, I expect to see a similar level of overspend next year. I ask the Minister pretty much the same question that I put to the Minister of Finance and Personnel earlier today. What effect will that have on the projects that the Minister had intended to deliver next year?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: That was quite a long question. I wish to point out that the Conservative Party, to which the Member referred, has guaranteed no cuts to health in the future. That has also been acted out in Wales and in Scotland. Therefore, this is the only part of the UK that is contemplating health cuts.

The Member voted for efficiency savings, and, if I interpret the Hansard report correctly, he also voted in favour of a motion that stated that cuts to health services were acceptable. I found that astonishing from a party that has the word “Labour” in its name.

As for overcommitment and undercommitment, there are issues about how we spend Government money. The deal is that because Departments cannot overspend, they must underspend. However, any money that Departments do not spend is taken off them, so we do not end up with wise spending; we simply end up with spending. Therefore, other Departments could end the financial year spending money on matters that are more frivolous than those on which I wish to spend. For example, I finally received Executive agreement on an action plan to implement the Bamford recommendations on mental health, learning disability and dementia services. As I start to increase the amount spent on mental health and learning disability, service developments will start to kick in. If my Department were to face cuts, that is the sort of area that would feel a great deal of pain.

Mr McCarthy: In light of what the Minister said, how much is he directing towards preventive medicine, which could result in less money having to be spent on front line services?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: We spend large amounts of money on primary healthcare and prevention. The Member will be aware that, with his support, I set up a Public Health Agency last year. One key element of its work is pressing down on the demands on the Health Service

by implementing policies that press down on health inequalities in particular.

In Northern Ireland, a person’s life expectancy depends on his or her postcode. Issues that impact on health, such as smoking, obesity, diet, lack of exercise, and so forth, are all part of the Public Health Agency’s remit. The agency works in other areas too, not least because problems with housing, education, employment, and so forth, are key contributors to the health inequalities that take years off people’s lives. When compared with males in more affluent areas, the life expectancy of males in some of the more disadvantaged communities is, on average, more than four years lower. The figure for females is approximately half of that. That is only the average figure; in several areas, the situation is much worse.

Omagh: New Hospital

5. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the proposed new hospital in Omagh; and when the procurement process will be completed and announced. (AQO 536/10)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Western Health and Social Care Trust has completed its review of the business case, including the procurement route, and submitted a revised business case for the new Omagh hospital to my Department. Officials are assessing that business case, and I will not be in a position to outline the way forward until their assessment is complete. I have set up a liaison committee, which includes Omagh District Council, to ensure that those concerned are kept informed of progress.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. However, I am somewhat disappointed that the procurement process and the review of it has been ongoing since March 2009. That is a rather lengthy period.

3.00 pm

I ask the Minister to give the same guarantee that he gave to the liaison group from Omagh in this Building some months ago: that, irrespective of whether the hospital was a PFI project or came from the capital budget, the money will not present a difficulty and that the money is in place. Can he inform the House whether that guarantee still stands? When will the new hospital be completed? Are we still on target to have it completed on time?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Mr Buchanan has been one of the resolute opponents of the process from day one. I have received a large number of questions and objections from Mr Buchanan and others who are trying to prevent the

enhanced local hospital from being built at Omagh. It is interesting to listen to the nature and tone of his question.

I met members of the council approximately a year ago. At that time, as the money stood, I said to them that it was my intention to build a new hospital, but Mr Buchanan will be aware of the turbulence in the financial markets. One day, PFI is best value for money, according to the Department of Finance and Personnel; the next day, it is traditional procurement. We are building the new acute hospital in Enniskillen using PFI at a cost of £260-odd million. In the next stage, we considered the Omagh hospital and decided that it was not value for money to continue with PFI because of the financial constraints in the money markets, so we explored a traditional procurement route.

We are now in a situation where money is short. The Member will know this probably better than I do, because his party colleague controls the purse strings. I am waiting to see how my budget will be affected. However, I can say that Omagh remains a priority for me, and if the necessary funding is available, I intend to build the new Omagh hospital, because it is appropriate for the population in that area. The enhanced local hospital will provide most of the hospital needs for around 70% of the population. That is my position at present.

We must have the money if we are to take the procurement route, or be able to pay for the hospital if we take the PFI route. My budgets are being severely undermined, and Members will hear more about that tomorrow. That does not mean that the hospital will be put off forever, but these things keep putting it back, year after year. Members have seen what has happened with the new regional hospital for children and women at the Royal Victoria Hospital site. It keeps being put back, because I do not have the support financially and this House will not give its support to the Health Department. I have made that clear. It has taken £700 million out of my Department for efficiencies and voted to support cuts to the Health Service. That is what the House has done, and it is on record. The House must alter its approach. Health is too important to be ignored.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Car Parking: South Belfast

1. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he plans to pilot the residents' parking scheme in other areas of south Belfast. (AQO 547/10)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The policy on the introduction of residents' parking schemes was amended in order to address concerns expressed by local residents in the first phase of schemes in Belfast. Unfortunately, following the most recent consultation, those schemes still failed to gain sufficient support to allow them to be implemented. I am aware of the difficulties experienced by residents in other areas of south Belfast. In light of experience gained to date, I have asked for a meeting with officials from Roads Service to discuss how best to proceed with the six schemes in the first phase and the next areas to be assessed.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his response. Obviously, the first pilot schemes were mostly related to commuter traffic problems and based on areas where the residents are very much from deprived communities. Understandably, they are unwilling to pay the annual fees. In response to local residents' requests, I recently sent out several hundred questionnaires in the Stranmillis area. The responses that I have received so far have been very positive; residents would very much like to see whether a pilot scheme can be run in the area. I would like to hear the Minister's response to that.

The Minister for Regional Development: The failure of the schemes was not due to charges. People were reluctant to pay charges, but following consultation with the five areas, the groups that we were speaking to decided to do away with the charges altogether. The charge had been reduced from £80 to £40 and then done away with altogether.

The scheme did not fall down on the issue of payment for a permit; rather, it fell down on a range of other matters. There was also a very low response, somewhere between 17% and 35%, and there had to be a significant threshold of response in favour of the scheme for it to go ahead.

We have looked at the potential of residents' parking schemes in a number of other areas in south Belfast. We want to revisit the areas that we tried originally and to try some areas outside Belfast, including the Bogside in Derry. Stranmillis is among the areas that have been considered for future parking schemes, and we intend to return to that issue. As I said, it is unfortunate and regrettable that we did not get the responses that we had anticipated from those areas. Even when we addressed what were presented to us as the primary concerns, we still did not get the response anticipated. However, that will not stop us from looking at other areas, including Stranmillis.

Mr K Robinson: I listened carefully to what the Minister said in reply to Ms Lo's question. Does the Minister accept that the solution of residents' parking schemes can sometimes be a two-edged sword in tackling a fundamental problem that afflicts not only

areas in south Belfast or, indeed, as my colleague said, in Rathfriland but those adjacent to the Ulster of University campus at Jordanstown, part of which will shortly move to north Belfast and add to the problems that exist there already?

The Minister for Regional Development: One of the lessons that we have learned through the exercise is that no two areas are the same. The first five schemes all presented different issues. People in some areas were quite happy with mixed parking schemes, whereby a pay-and-display facility allowed a turnover of car parking, but people in other areas were not. No two areas are the same in that respect.

I know that parking at university campuses is presenting problems for residents in the Jordanstown area as well as for those in the Queen's University area of south Belfast, where some students are parking all week. In my constituency, I know that the further and higher education campus in Newry is also presenting some parking problems for residents who live in areas close to it.

No two schemes are the same. I agree with the Member's assessment that parking schemes are sometimes seen as the answer to all problems when that is not necessarily the case. That is why there has been a substantial degree of consultation with residents in each area. When people identify that they want a scheme, it is incumbent on Roads Service to work with them to develop and test ideas on the type of scheme that may suit their area. That is why the process has been very lengthy to date. Unfortunately, it has not worked in this case, but that is not to say that the idea of restricted parking in residential areas, which through no fault of their own are impacted by a large neighbour, should not be explored. However, no two schemes will be the same.

Footpaths

2. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the responsibilities of Roads Service and local councils for the clearing of footpaths in town centres. (AQO 548/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: There is no statutory duty on Roads Service or, indeed, on district councils, which have responsibilities for street cleaning, to salt or clear snow and ice from footways. That said, the Member will be aware that Roads Service provides salt boxes at strategic locations that can be used by the public on a self-help basis to help to prevent the formation of snow and ice on pavements and roads.

Mr Storey: That is regrettable, after what can only be described as the horrendous situation across Northern Ireland and in my constituency, in particular,

where there have been numerous falls as a result of no one — neither Roads Service nor the local councils — taking responsibility for clearing footways. I am sure that the Minister is being inundated, as we all are, with queries about the issue. Will he consider the Highways Act 1980 that was introduced in England to give statutory responsibility to local authorities for salting footpaths in particular? The Minister made reference to “fall down” in his previous answer, and we had numerous “fall downs” over an intense period of severe weather. We cannot allow that situation to develop again.

The Minister for Regional Development: I sympathise entirely with what the Member is saying. I do not think that there is any Assembly Member here who has not had experience of that over the past weeks or who has not had to deal with constituents. Indeed, I had to bring a family member to a fracture clinic over Christmas, and I met people there who had suffered injuries.

I will give the Member some background on how we have arrived at this situation. Following the most fundamental review of winter services in 2001, the then Minister proposed that in periods of prolonged lying snow, he would seek to enlist the help of other agencies, such as district councils, to assist in clearing busy town centre footways.

It was in that context that he wrote to each council outlining proposals for partnering arrangements for the removal of snow and ice from town centre footways and pedestrian areas. Roads Service followed up that initial contact by writing to each council explaining its proposals in detail and enclosing a proposed model agreement.

In consultation with NILGA, Roads Service drew up a draft legal agreement, to which the councils' response was very limited. The councils' main concerns regarding the proposals were around the public-liability aspect of such arrangements. The model arrangement made it clear that, for those purposes, councils would be acting as agents of the Department and would, therefore, enjoy a similar indemnity against claims for injury or damage resulting from the presence of ice or snow to that of others acting as agents of the Department. However, the Department could not accept the councils' statutory liability as an employer or for acts of negligence by the councils' workforce. Although some councils indicated a willingness to participate in the proposed arrangements, unfortunately, only two councils signed up to the agreement.

Therefore, there was a discussion in 2001 to try to broker an arrangement whereby councils would become involved in the gritting of footways. Given that the gritting carried out by Roads Service largely

involves machines and vehicles and that the gritting of footpaths would be manual work, I think that it would be much more suited to local government. I had a conversation with people from local government who told me about staff having to go home on days when they could have been out doing that type of work. I think that it is sensible to try to revisit that discussion. I have already asked the head of Roads Service to do that, and, in recent weeks, I have spoken to people in local government. I think that there is a willingness to revisit the issue and to try to crack the problems that resulted in only two councils out of 26 agreeing to sign up to the proposals.

I share the Member's view that it is necessary to close the gap and to ensure that, while Roads Service is paying attention to the roads network and to keeping traffic moving, some attention is paid to the footways, too.

Mr Attwood: I am sure that the Minister will agree that it is cold comfort to those who are housebound and who are injured, including members of his family, to hear about what happened years ago with mechanisms that could have been put in place but were not. Will the Minister give a commitment to conduct a review not just of who is responsible for clearing footpaths, but of all learning that arises from the recent severe weather. Given the vagaries of weather that we now experience at various seasons throughout the year, if there is severe weather this time next year, we cannot allow the deficits that are clearly on record and in the public domain to arise again.

The Minister for Regional Development: We conducted a review of last year's experience, and the chief problem brought to our attention was the issue of schools that had to close over the winter period, particularly in rural areas, because of the inability of students and staff to access them. A survey was carried out of all schools and, having indicated that they were having problems, 46 schools were added to the gritting schedules. That was last year's problem, and we have not yet seen the full winter out to assess what impact the review had on the situation.

It seems that the focus this year is on footways and on people falling or having accidents. I am quite happy to continually look at the operation of winter treatment works and, as I indicated to the previous Member who asked a question, I am quite happy to revisit the discussions with local government to see whether we can find a solution.

Mrs Long: Can the Minister reassure me that when reviewing this year's situation, he will look at the supply of grit available for grit boxes? In many cases, residents were willing to use grit boxes to grit the pavements themselves but found the boxes empty. When they went to Roads Service depots to get more grit, they found them closed because, for example, so

many companies were clearing out supplies to use on their own premises, such as car parks. Will the Minister assure the House that he will consider that when reviewing the processes so that people who are able to grit the streets are in a position to do so?

The Minister for Regional Development: That is something that I raised at my recent meeting with Roads Service, particularly in relation to rural areas where gritters are not able to treat some of the roads and where salt boxes and grit piles must be made available and replenished when empty. There has not been an issue here, as there has been in the South and in Britain, with how much salt is available. Fortunately, through good planning by Roads Service, there has been sufficient salt for it to operate with.

The difficulty has been getting that grit out at times. There are about 3,500 grit boxes or grit piles along roads across the North, which need to be kept replenished. There were cases of people exploiting that facility and lifting the grit for private use, which presented a problem.

3.15 pm

There is an issue with people trying to access yards to get their own grit, because there are health and safety implications when there is such large machinery filling gritters and manoeuvring about a yard. I have indicated to Roads Service that an important part of the service is to try to replenish the grit boxes and grit piles so that communities can help themselves. As I said, due to its own good planning, Roads Service has sufficient grit, it is just a matter of getting it out to the public.

It would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to the Roads Service staff who go out in difficult conditions. Those people have been going out for a prolonged period, since mid-December, and by the looks of things, they could be keeping that service up until the end of the month at least. I pay tribute to those people for their dedication and for going out in very dangerous driving conditions to try to keep the network operating.

Rural Roads: Resurfacing

3. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans for the resurfacing of rural roads. (AQO 549/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: First, I should explain that the rural roads network accounts for around 80% of the overall network length. Given the extent of the rural roads network, Roads Service implements a programme of planned maintenance, including resurfacing, to ensure that that asset remains safe and serviceable to road users. Priorities are assessed on the basis of information obtained from

condition surveys, other works programmes and professional engineering assessments.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Minister for his reply. Does he feel that he has enough funds available in the current CSR period to maintain a safe and usable rural roads infrastructure, especially in light of the recent very cold spell?

The Minister for Regional Development: It is no secret that the amount of money identified by Roads Service over the CSR period amounted to about £300 million, and it is probable that the amount of money that we will actually get over that period is about £200 million. Therefore, the amount that Roads Service receives will not be what it identified as necessary to carry out the level of maintenance that it wanted to. Whether there is enough money to carry out a level of maintenance that ensures that the network is safe is another matter of judgement.

The Member is right. The weather that we are experiencing, in addition to the heavy traffic that passes, results in quite a lot of significant damage, particularly to small rural roads. The roads were not built for the volume and weight of traffic that is going over them, and the current type of weather adds seriously to the damage. We have made no secret of that. We commissioned a report that showed the extent of repairs and ongoing resurfacing and restructuring that was necessary on the roads network. We have not got sufficient funds to address that. Roads Service has to operate with what it has.

I will continue to argue for more resources, and the Member will be aware that we have managed to attract £15 million additional funding for the roads network in the most recent monitoring round, which is very welcome. Nonetheless, I have made it very clear that we are not satisfied with the current level of investment. It needs to be increased. The most valuable asset owned by the Executive is the roads network. We have to look after it, or we are storing up more significant problems for the future.

Mr Gallagher: The £15 million allocation that the Finance Minister announced in his statement this morning is, of course, welcome.

The Roads Service statistic for resurfacing our rural roads is that, according to the current funding arrangements, each road will be resurfaced once every 187 years. Does the Minister agree that that is a dreadful statistic? Will he outline any plans to help to improve that dreadful statistic?

The Minister for Regional Development: I agree that that is a shocking statistic, but it was released to indicate to people the extent of investment that is required and the extent of underinvestment that we are dealing with. I will continue to bid in the in-year monitoring rounds for additional funding to try to

supplement that budget. There was a habit whereby Roads Service would bid for the money that it required for structural maintenance, it would receive about 70% of that from DFP and have the amount topped-up in-year to about 80% or 90%.

One of the double-edged swords of devolution is that, because locally accountable Ministers operate their own Departments, very little money returns to the pot for redistribution. Although the £15 million that Roads Service received in the December monitoring round is welcome, that sort of traditional top-up has become a rarity. The required funding for structural maintenance needs to be made at the start of the CSR period rather than using the previous method of allocating two thirds and trying to top that up with in-year monitoring.

Mr McCarthy: People who work for water, telephone and gas services open up rural roads. Thereafter, rural roads are left in an even worse state, and there does not seem to be any authority to make those people restore the roads to, at least, their condition prior to the work on the site. Will the Minister do anything to overcome that problem?

The Minister for Regional Development: As I have said on many occasions, Roads Service does not have the power to prevent people opening up roads. If services are there, they have the right to open up roads. Roads Service has the power to regulate that situation to ensure that it does not happen on a continual basis, to organise that activity into manageable chunks and to ensure that people reinstate the roads. A recent Public Accounts Committee report contained a series of recommendations to tighten up that process, to ensure that roads are properly reinstated and that a proper requirement exists to regulate such activities. Roads Service has accepted those recommendations, and I look forward to an improvement in the process.

Rural Roads: Safety

4. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Regional Development what planning was undertaken to ensure that travel in rural areas was as safe as possible during the recent cold weather; and if the practice of leaving grit close to danger spots on minor roads has been cut back to reduce costs. (AQO 550/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: Prior to the start of each winter service season, Roads Service carries out a significant amount of pre-planning to ensure a state of readiness for the coming winter. As well as several routine pre-season checks, planning includes ensuring that adequate staffing arrangements are in place, including training for new staff where required. Moreover, planning ensures an adequate

supply of salt and that winter service equipment is in working order.

Although Roads Service targets the limited resources that are available for that service on busier through routes, salt bins or grit piles may be provided for use by the public on a self-help basis on other routes that have been adopted or maintained by Roads Service that do not qualify for inclusion under the gritting schedule. Roads Service already commits significant resources to maintain approximately 3,500 salt bins that are provided on public roads. There have been no cutbacks to that service because of financial constraints.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his answer. Although this particularly difficult period of weather was not predictable, it appears to the layman that little planning took place to ensure that we could cope with such an emergency situation. Constituents have raised that matter at different levels, particularly in relation to rural roads. The impression that has been created is that there were cutbacks in grit and grit boxes throughout parts of rural constituencies. I ask the Minister to confirm that there were cutbacks and a lack of preparation for this spell of weather.

The Minister for Regional Development: I am not sure where the Member gets his information. I have said that there were no cutbacks to provision of 3,500 salt piles or grit boxes across the country. Given his assertion, could he provide some evidence or information to that effect?

The Member mentioned preparation, and £5 million is allocated before we know what the winter will throw at us. Roads Service filled up its salt depots. During a cold spell in early November, some of that salt was used. Roads Service took the opportunity to top up its supplies, which left it in a fairly good position. When the Member uses the media to examine the experience in the South and in Britain, where the authorities have, in essence, been unable to provide a service because they have run out of material, he will recognise that preparations were quite thorough here and ensured a proper supply of salt.

An ongoing top-up is available from the salt suppliers in Carrickfergus to ensure that we have enough to keep us going for as long as is necessary. There is no evidence of any financial cutback in that regard. As a matter of fact, because the £5 million that was allocated for the winter service provision has almost been used up, we have already sought additional resources to ensure that we continue to provide that level of service.

I am not sure where the Member is getting the evidence for his allegations, but if he has evidence that cutbacks have been made or that there has been a lack of preparation, I will be happy to receive it from him.

Mr Shannon: The Minister said that there was no evidence to support the claims that Alban Maginness made about cutbacks to the supply of grit boxes. However, there is a way of ensuring that we address the issue of gritting rural roads. Does the Minister intend to establish an agreement with farmers that will allow them to have grit so that they can treat the roads in places that DRD cannot get to? Furthermore, will he ensure that grit boxes are available outside DRD offices across the Province? DRD made grit available to farmers in Lisburn, but that did not happen in other places, including Newtownards.

The Minister for Regional Development: I am aware that different arrangements were in place in different locations. We had discussions over the summer with my colleague the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development about employing farmers to grit roads. Officials examined current practices and what could be achieved, and although there is an established and ongoing role for farmers who have equipment for clearing snow, it was noted that farmers do not have equipment for spreading salt on smaller roads, and it did not make sense to involve them in that.

When I visited the Roads Service depot on Airport Road in Belfast, I saw people pulling up to use the grit boxes that are situated there. The difficulty was that people from commercial interests were also using them and taking the entire supply, which led to Roads Service withdrawing that facility in certain areas because it was being abused. I do not doubt that this year's experience will throw up more lessons for us. We continuously review our response to determine where it can be improved, and some of the questions that the Member asked will form part of that discussion.

Mr Beggs: Cutbacks in Great Britain have led to grit shortages. I accept the Minister's contention that there are no shortages here at present. Nevertheless, can he assure us that stocks remain to enable roadside gritting points to be replenished and that secondary routes, where necessary, will continue to be covered? How many days of grit stocks remain in Northern Ireland?

The Minister for Regional Development: My most recent discussion on this issue with the head of Roads Service took place last week, so my information is a few days old. At that stage, because of the freezing weather conditions, Roads Service was using approximately 2,000 tons of grit a night. That may change if the weather alters. Roads Service was also getting 1,000 tons of grit back into the system from the suppliers in Carrickfergus. At that stage, under those conditions, it was estimated that there were enough supplies to last for another fortnight at least. However, we must bear in mind that the supply is being continuously topped up with 1,000 tons from the Carrickfergus supplier. Roads Service was confident that the service that is being provided to date, on the

roads and at the grit piles, will be available for the foreseeable future.

Rural Roads: Maintenance

5. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will implement a more systematic approach to funding roads maintenance to ensure that rural dwellers do not suffer in the long term as a result of the damage to roads during the recent icy weather. (AQO 551/10)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service has advised that article 8 of the Roads Order 1993 places a duty on it to maintain all public roads in reasonable condition. Although I appreciate the damage that icy conditions can do to rural roads, Roads Service has in place maintenance standards that are designed to ensure a consistent service level and safe highways while offering best value for money. Those standards are based on practice, research and consultation with the public, other professional bodies and industry.

In distributing the resources that are available for road maintenance, allocations are made to the four Roads Service divisions on the basis of need using a range of weighted indicators that are tailored to each maintenance activity, such as resurfacing, patching, gully emptying and grass cutting.

Divisions use those indicators when apportioning across council areas to ensure an equitable distribution of funds as far as possible across the whole of the North.

3.30 pm

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree with me and his colleagues in south Armagh that the state of our rural roads has worsened drastically because of a lack of investment in surface dressing and resurfacing schemes? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr D Bradley: As a result of the recent freezing conditions, our rural roads network is crumbling. Many roads are in a worse state than they have ever been. How does the Minister intend to address that problem?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members for order so that the Minister can reply.

The Minister for Regional Development: I accept that the recent severe weather has had a negative impact on the roads. Nonetheless, £200 million is being spent on structural maintenance over the three-year period of the comprehensive spending review. That is a substantial amount of money. I have clearly

identified that that is not enough from the Roads Service's perspective. More needs to be invested in rural roads to keep them up to the required standard.

I welcome the Member's conversion to the fact that the most substantial asset that the Executive own is the roads network. Members of his party have argued since the return of devolution that the only asset the Executive need to invest in is social housing. I welcome his recognition that we need more investment in roads and I look forward to the support of the Member and his party during the next budgetary discussions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members will have noticed that there is a noise coming from one of the cameras in the Chamber. That is being worked on.

Mr Elliott: Given the very inclement weather in some parts of the Province, particularly in my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, does the Minister accept that some roads will become unusable and impassable without further maintenance?

The Minister for Regional Development: I sincerely hope that that is not the case. Every time someone mentions the condition of rural roads, I am heartened by support from Members across all parties for additional funding for the Roads Service to deal with the issue. I expect that to be reflected when it comes to budgetary discussions in the Executive.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

QUESTION FOR URGENT ORAL ANSWER

OFMDFM: 'Spotlight' Programme

Mr Speaker: Order. For those Members who were absent, I wish to repeat to the House what I announced earlier this afternoon. I have received written notice from the First Minister, Peter Robinson, that under section 16(A)11 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, he has designated Mrs Arlene Foster, Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, to exercise the functions of the office of First Minister. That designation takes immediate effect. Having made that announcement, I arranged for a letter to be made available in the Business Office and met with the Whips at 3.00 pm to discuss any questions that they may have had about the letter. I encourage Members to speak to the party Whips if there are any other matters that they may need clarified.

As I said to the House earlier, I received notification of a question for urgent oral answer this morning, which I gave some consideration to and decided to accept. I warn Members from all sides of the House that I am not looking for statements from them. That is vitally important. What I am looking for are questions to what the original question is all about. I do not want Members to stray outside the question that we are debating on the Floor this afternoon. It is important that that is clear. Let us not have further statements from Members. Let us, as far as possible, have questions to the original question. If all that is clear, we shall proceed.

I have received notice of a question for urgent oral answer under Standing Order 20A to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline to the Assembly any possible implications for OFMDFM in respect of allegations relating to financial matters made by the BBC 'Spotlight' programme

The Acting First Minister (Mrs Foster): Earlier today, the First Minister, pursuant to section 16A(11) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, wrote to you, the Presiding Officer, designating me to carry out the functions of the office of First Minister. During this period, I will carry out those functions while the First Minister helps to deal with his wife's medical problems. I have already discussed handling arrangements with the deputy First Minister and how the work of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will be carried out in the coming weeks.

On behalf of the First Minister, I want to make it clear that he entirely rejects the sole allegation made by the BBC 'Spotlight' programme and that he will be seeking to clear his name in the days that lie ahead.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I would like to wish Minister Foster well. My rationale for tabling the question is not the Robinsons' private family matters. Serious allegations were raised in the BBC 'Spotlight' programme, and there is an issue of public confidence. It is crucially important that the outstanding political issues are resolved and resolved speedily. As well as everything else that needs to be cleared up, that means getting an early date for the transfer of powers on policing and justice. There is a limited time frame in which to sort out these matters.

The BBC 'Spotlight' programme raised questions that are serious in their nature. They are serious political questions that need to be responded to very, very quickly, as well as writing to the Committee on Standards and Privileges about how these matters will be resolved. For me, other MLAs in the House and, indeed, public confidence, I would like to ask the Minister —

Mr Speaker: Order, order. I ask the Member, and I emphasise the point to all Members, to be very careful. It is vitally important that, as far as possible, Members keep to the original question. I am not trying to stifle debate in the Chamber. I am just asking the Member to be careful in what question is asked to the Minister; that is all that I am saying.

Ms Ní Chuilín: In conclusion, in respect of the allegations relating to the financial matters made by the BBC in the 'Spotlight' programme —
[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Will the Minister assure me as an MLA, other Members in the House and, indeed, the public on how a speedy conclusion can be made to bring about transparency and a robust response?

The Acting First Minister: I thank the Member for her question. First of all, the Departmental Solicitor's Office has already considered the allegations made in the 'Spotlight' programme and advised Peter Robinson that he was not in breach of the ministerial code, the Pledge of Office, the ministerial code of conduct or the seven principles of public life. It is important to say that first of all. As well as that, Peter Robinson has now written to the Chairpersons of the Committees on Standards and Privileges in both Westminster and the Assembly to ask them to conduct a full investigation into the allegation made by the BBC 'Spotlight' programme. It needs to be made very clear that the process that the First Minister has asked to be initiated involving senior counsel is not intended to be an

alternative to other processes that may, and undoubtedly will, be carried out.

However, I will go to the heart of the Member's question: the First Minister very much believes that an early indication needs to be given in relation to the allegations. I personally am confident, and my party is very confident, that this will confirm that Peter Robinson, the First Minister, acted entirely properly at all times. But, let us have that, and let us have it quickly, because we need to move on. The Member made reference to other issues that need to be dealt with. She is absolutely right: other issues need to be dealt with. Frankly, this is all a distraction for the people of Northern Ireland when we have other issues to deal with. I refer particularly to the issue that was mentioned first in the House earlier today: the attempted murder of a police officer.

That is why we need to really focus on what is going on here. We will deal with the issues, but there are issues more important to the people of Northern Ireland to be dealt with, and I say that very strongly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): I am grateful for the opportunity to ask a question on behalf of the OFMDFM Committee and then to follow up from a party political perspective. I thank the interim First Minister for taking questions today, and I congratulate her on her — even temporary — appointment.

When does the Acting First Minister expect the departmental investigation to present the findings? Will my Committee be briefed on the investigation and subsequent findings? In respect of my party's considerations, there are obviously matters of concern that the 'Spotlight' programme highlighted. The ones of a personal nature should, in the view of my party and me, remain purely private matters for the Robinson family. We wish them well as they attempt to resolve those.

The second matter is, of course, of a more public nature. Will the Acting First Minister confirm whether public resources are being utilised in the investigation that the First Minister has instigated? Will she confirm whether the deputy First Minister has agreed to the process? Can she explain how the investigation that is under way will be seen as independent and considered as such? Will she also confirm whether the investigation is being conducted in a manner that was advised by OFMDFM officials? Finally, will the Acting First Minister confirm how long she can act as a caretaker in charge of OFMDFM?

The Acting First Minister: In relation to that last question, the Member is all too aware of the legislation, as, indeed, is the rest of this House. I made it very clear when I opened my statement that this is a temporary

arrangement. It is something that his party should be very much aware of because, in the past, somebody who was very much in my position as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment acted on behalf of the First Minister. There have also been occasions, although there was no formal arrangement, as I understand it, when the Minister of Agriculture was assisted by colleagues during her confinement due to her maternity.

Legal advice has already been sought, and I have made reference to the fact that it has already been given back to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Two opinions have been received from the Departmental Solicitor's Office that indicate that there was no breach of various codes and standards. There will be another departmental investigation set up, which we want to happen very quickly so that we can have that dealt with. I have already indicated that Peter has written to the Assembly Ombudsman and the Committee here, and to the parliamentary Committee in Westminster.

Let us be very clear: Peter Robinson is going to clear his name. I have no doubt about that. One sole allegation was made. That sole allegation will be dealt with, and I want to be very clear about that. My standing here is very much temporary. I do it in the knowledge that when Peter comes back, he will come back with a clear record.

Mr Dodds: I wish the Minister well in her extra responsibilities that she has taken on. The Members on these Benches know that she will be able to carry out those functions extremely competently, given her previous record in ministerial office. We wish Mrs Foster well in her role, alongside, of course, the First Minister, who will continue to play an active role in relation to addressing many of the challenging and difficult issues that remain to be addressed in the political process.

3.45 pm

Will the Minister confirm that there is absolutely no reason whatsoever that the work of her Department, that of OFMDFM or that of the Northern Ireland Government should be in any way impaired or set back as a result of this development and that we will be able to continue to move forward, delivering on behalf of those people of Northern Ireland who sent us here, while concentrating on the real and important issues that she outlined and that concern people most?

Does she further agree that it is absolutely vital that, as well as allowing all the necessary proper investigations and examinations to take place, it is in everybody's interest to provide quickly whatever extra assurance those particular departmental investigations can give? The hope is that those investigations will be concluded very speedily and that we will see the First

Minister resume his duties in the House as quickly as possible?

The Acting First Minister: I am sure it is the hope and desire of the entire House that the First Minister will be able to come back to his post as quickly as possible.

So far as the work of OFMDFM is concerned, I actually think that Peter has sent out a very important signal today of the importance that he attaches to his role in the Executive and the Assembly for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland. He feels that, temporarily, he would not be able to focus entirely on his role. Those of us who know him know that he devotes his life to politics, and therefore he felt that he could not do that, so that is why he has asked me to do this on a temporary basis, with the support of my colleagues all around me, and of that I have no doubt.

Mr Durkan: I wish the Minister well with the added responsibilities that have now been thrust upon her. I wish not only her but the deputy First Minister well in the conduct of matters over the coming weeks in circumstances that will not be easy for him either. We need to recognise that and that there will be operational working constraints and difficulties created in this situation.

Will the Minister indicate whether advice was offered by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to the First and deputy First Minister when they arrived in their respective offices on Friday, or were all the initiatives in seeking meetings with the Departmental Solicitor's Office left entirely to the Ministers themselves? How were the inquiries that were established or commissioned, how were they authorised or approved in terms of departmental procedures, spending or any other implications, including precedent?

I note that the Minister indicated that she will work to discharge her responsibilities and that she has already met the deputy First Minister. Will she indicate whether she envisages following through on the matters that were raised in the letter from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister of 2 December to all MLAs? Will there be meetings with all the party leaders and others with a view to moving things forward on the devolution of justice and policing, or are there limits to the degree to which she will operate the functions of the Department and the joint office, given that the Assembly has recently legislated to provide that office with more powers to bring forward the devolution of justice and policing?

The Acting First Minister: I simply do not know the answer to the first part of the Member's question. I am quite sure that we can work that out by following it up in written correspondence. From my own knowledge Friday was a rather fraught day, as I am sure the Member will know. Meetings did not take

place then, but they have taken place today, and those will be followed up.

On the other issue that the Member mentioned, one of the reasons why Peter asked me to act up as First Minister was that, obviously, he had other matters to deal with. However, he felt that doing so would allow him to devote any time that he did have to the issue of policing and justice and that I would deal with the official, the routine issues of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Let us not forget that negotiations — progress — in relation to policing and justice is not an official remit of the office of First Minister, but rather, it is dealt with through political negotiations. Therefore, the fact that I am dealing with these issues means that there is more space allowed in which to deal with the other issues.

Mr Ford: On behalf of my colleagues, I wish the Minister well with her new responsibilities. In these circumstances, I am not sure whether the word "congratulations" is appropriate, but we certainly wish her well.

She mentioned the business with which we started in the Assembly today; the attempted murder of Constable Peadar Heffron in Antrim on Friday, and she emphasised the importance of seeing these institutions working well together. I am a bit perturbed by the answer that she has just given to Mark Durkan. The suggestion that a Minister who is stepping down because he has to clear his name and, because of family concerns, is somehow going to have the time to carry forward the work on the devolution of justice, while she deals with what she described as routine matters, causes me considerable concern. Will she give us an assurance that she will not be a caretaker Minister, but that she will be an active Minister and will actively pursue all that needs to be done to see these institutions working well and delivering for the people of Northern Ireland and to show the dissidents that politics can work?

The Acting First Minister: Thank you very much. I wholeheartedly agree that devolution is in the best interests of all the people of Northern Ireland, which is one of the reasons why I firmly believe in this place; whereas others outside this place would say otherwise.

I am sorry that the Member picked me up wrongly. Today, the Assembly party, the parliamentary party and the European Member all said very, very strongly that Peter should remain as our party leader. As party leader, he has responsibilities, and he will continue with those responsibilities. I and, indeed, my ministerial colleagues and the deputy leader of the DUP will be involved in moving other things forward. This is not Peter acting on his own: this is very much Peter acting from the front with his colleagues behind him, and we will work together as a team on those

issues. We intend to do that this week. I want to be very clear about that. Peter has put me into this position temporarily, but he is still the First Minister of Northern Ireland. I am only acting up for him in this role.

Ms Purvis: I also wish the Minister well as she exercises her new responsibilities as Acting First Minister. Will she clarify whether the actions taken by her party today are, in fact, in the best interests of her office, the Assembly and the governing institutions of Northern Ireland, which belong to the people of Northern Ireland and are not the possession of any party inside or outside this Chamber, and that these actions by her party are not focused on simply preserving whatever is left of its electoral fortunes?

The Acting First Minister: We can all dream. I believe that Peter has acted with complete integrity. His decision to temporarily step aside from carrying out his duties as First Minister was, in part, driven by his wish to clear his name from allegations of impropriety once and for all. In doing so, he will submit himself to the full scrutiny of any investigation that the Assembly may instigate, although he has already instigated one himself in respect of the Assembly. He has also stated that he will review his position if any inquiry or investigation finds that the allegation has some substance to the integrity of the Assembly, so that we can move forward and the Assembly is protected very clearly. I do not know how much more open the House expects Peter Robinson to be. He has done everything that has been asked of him, and he will submit himself to all the inquiries that come forward. Do you know why? It is because he has nothing to answer for. I believe that firmly in my heart, and I know that the party believes that as well.

Mr Speaker: Order. We shall move on to the next item of business on the Order Paper —

Mr Poots: On a point of order, Mr Speaker; will you clarify to the House how, under the Members' code of conduct, a complaint can be brought forward against a Member who has withheld information from the police that may lead to the prosecution of paedophiles?

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order, but if the Member wants to have a debate on the Floor of the House on any issue, there is a clear procedure that he can follow, and he will get all the advice that he needs from the Business Office.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You kindly provided an opportunity to have this question session today. The media, in pursuit of events, may well provide regular reports on potential new disclosures as they develop, such as in tonight's 'Panorama'. Therefore, are we to expect a running commentary, under your direction, Mr Speaker, to the

House from the First Minister designate on denials or rejections by the First Minister?

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again, that is not a point of order. The Member will know — and know quite well — that I do not come to the House with information supplied by any outlet of the press, irrespective of from whom it or where it comes. I said this morning that these are complex matters, and Members should speak to the Clerk or to the Business Office. There are other ways of dealing with business in this House.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Statutory Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is a motion on Statutory Committee membership. As is the case with other similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Billy Leonard be appointed as a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. — [*Ms Ní Chuilín.*]

Standing Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is a motion on Standing Committee membership. As is the case with other similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Billy Leonard be appointed as a member of the Committee on Procedures, and the Committee on Standards and Privileges. — [*Ms Ní Chuilín.*]

Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority's Overview Report

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 wish to speak will have five minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr Wells): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority's Overview Report on infection prevention/hygiene inspections (November 2009) which states that there must be a greater emphasis on clinical leadership and team-working to assure hygiene and infection control practice; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to "bring back matron"; and to provide nursing ward managers with the support and authority to do their work effectively.

I was very pleased to see such a huge turnout at 3.30 pm for my debate, but, when I stood up, I watched everybody scuttling for the door. It must be my aftershave. Nevertheless, those Members who have remained will agree that we are dealing with a very important subject this afternoon.

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

I have moved the motion on behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Before I start, I wish to give some background to the motion. I wish to make it clear that the term "matron", as used in the text of the motion, is meant in a gender neutral sense. I am aware that for some people a matron means a female nurse. In today's environment, the term most commonly used for matron is ward manager or charge nurse, and that person can be male or female.

The Health Committee recently spent some time looking at the issue of hospital hygiene and, in particular, we examined a series of reports recently published by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, or RQIA, as it is more commonly known. The reports dealt with issues of infection control and hygiene inspections. The RQIA has now carried out an unannounced infection control and hygiene inspection at each of the acute hospitals in Northern Ireland.

4.00 pm

The RQIA programme of unannounced inspections of hospitals began in March 2008 and was completed in 2009. The Committee examined the latest of its reports and focused specifically on the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and the Royal Group of Hospitals. I must emphasise that those inspections are carried out without warning. Hospital staff are not informed until the moment that inspectors turn up at

the door. Indeed, the team of inspectors turns up at 9.00 am. The inspectors ring the chief executive of the relevant trust and tell him or her that they are about to enter the hospital. That is how little warning is given by RQIA staff.

The inspection process provides a snapshot of what is happening on a given day in a ward or clinical area. After the inspection is completed, feedback is given immediately to trust staff, and a formal report is issued within 20 working days. The relevant trust is then required to submit an action plan describing its response to the findings. In the event that issues that require immediate attention are identified during an inspection, the RQIA will bring those matters to the chief executive's attention. Indeed, as I will discuss later, urgent attention was required in one particular ward in the Royal Group of Hospitals that meant that it had to be closed down and refurbished immediately. Therefore, action can be as immediate as that: it does not have to wait until the report's publication or delivery of the trust's action plan.

It is worth pointing out that the unannounced hygiene inspections found examples of both poor and good practice in most hospital wards and clinical areas. It is important that we are not entirely negative. Headlines have focused on examples of poor hospital hygiene. However, there were many examples of good hygiene as well.

In taking evidence, the Committee may have focused on the Belfast Trust, but other trusts and acute hospitals were examined. That information is freely available on the RQIA website. Although the Committee focused on the Royal Group of Hospitals, other hospitals, particularly those in the Northern Trust area, had excellent results and should be acknowledged for what they have achieved. Indeed, earlier, I spoke to my colleague Rev Robert Coulter — I am not sure whether he has been awarded an MBE, a knighthood, or an OBE; however, he thoroughly deserves it, whatever it is — and he complimented the standard of hygiene and care that he observed during his wife's recent convalescence in the Antrim Area Hospital.

Certainly, the Northern Trust has been highly successful in that entire area. It has adopted most of the recommendations that arose from the separate RQIA review on the outbreak of *clostridium difficile* in the trust. I understand that there has been a 30% reduction in the incidence of the bacterium in the Northern Trust's hospitals. The high level of compliance that the RQIA notes in the unannounced hygiene report shows that the processes and practices that lead to good hygiene are achievable. It is encouraging that that can happen. The Committee would encourage all trusts to consider the Northern Trust as an example of good practice in that area.

In taking evidence on the subject, the Committee also heard from a dedicated and determined individual about how poor hygiene in the Royal Group of Hospitals had led to a close relative of his acquiring an infection that left him disabled. Indeed, the ward in which the relative was treated was one of those that was subjected to unannounced hygiene inspections. The individual never gave up: he was absolutely determined in his quest to ensure that hygiene and cleanliness improved in the Royal Group of Hospitals. The Committee commends him for his efforts. It is sufficient to say that, after the subsequent RQIA inspection, the ward in which that gentleman's relative was treated was closed for refurbishment.

Hospital hygiene is a serious issue for the Health Service. A clear link exists between hygiene and infection control. I am sure that I will hear in the debate about how infection levels are still in decline. However, hygiene is still a serious problem in hospitals. The evidence that was submitted to the Committee shows that the RQIA had concerns about the physical environment of some wards when it came to repair, redecoration and refurbishment. However, of absolutely vital importance is the fact that the vast majority of the action points in the report related to staff practice and cleaning in hospitals. Ward F and the accident and emergency department in the Royal Group of Hospitals achieved low scores for hand hygiene practices and for ensuring that equipment that was used to treat patients was clean and ready for use.

Let us look at some actual examples from the RQIA report: congealed blood on trolleys; faeces on trolleys; overfilled sharps bins with items protruding from the top; and domestic waste bags left sitting for days. Apart from a couple of members of the Health Committee, nobody is an expert on health and hygiene. However, even we, with our limited knowledge, saw things going on in acute hospital wards in Northern Ireland that our parents and grandparents would never have tolerated in their own homes. It is not acceptable for that to be happening.

Concern also focused on the minimal score achieved for clinical practice. Ward 4F achieved low scores in many areas and was identified as an area requiring immediate attention not only for its environment and cleanliness but because of staff practice. The RQIA stated and the Committee believes that effective clinical leadership at ward level and above is essential to ensure compliance with cleaning levels and standards. The RQIA report is clear that improvements in culture, leadership, cleaning and decluttering as well as increasing staff knowledge and practice could be achieved with little or no additional cost. It is one of the rare areas in health where money or resources is not the issue: it is attitude and practice. It is important

to realise that much can be achieved with very little additional expenditure.

It was concern with staff practices that led to the Committee's submitting the motion. All Committee members were concerned that it appeared that a lack of leadership was a major contributing factor to poor hygiene standards. Nurses are responsible and accountable for reducing infection risk and, therefore, require the knowledge and skills necessary to prevent and control infection.

Additionally and, perhaps, more importantly, nurses require the skills and resources to ensure cleanliness on their wards. On the basis of informal meetings between the Committee and the Royal College of Nursing, it appears that nurses are not given the power to do the jobs that they are employed to do. The RCN was clear that its members would be keen to step up to the plate and take on that role.

There is a feeling that there has been an erosion in the ward manager's authority. Nurses want the support and authority to ensure that wards are clean, and they are prepared to be held accountable when things go wrong. That fact stood out when the Committee took evidence from the Belfast Trust. I was shocked and surprised at the apparent lack of accountability. The Committee was told that it was a case of everybody being responsible, so no one was responsible. The Committee was surprised to learn that there had been no disciplinary action against any member of staff for hygiene failings in the trust. According to the staff of the Belfast Trust, the most that happened was that stiff conversations were held with the members of staff involved. Much sterner action would have been taken if it had been a private company.

Let me make it clear that the Committee is not on a witch hunt. We have been very clear on that. Nevertheless, there is something wrong when no one is held accountable for failings as severe as those outlined in the RQIA's report. The systems and procedures for cleanliness in hospitals are in place. There are documents upon documents and systems and procedures, yet it appears that nothing happens and papers lie on shelves gathering dust.

The Committee noted that the Health Minister had indicated that he would set up a new team to drive up cleanliness standards in hospitals and other healthcare facilities. The team will report to the Minister on a monthly basis and will comprise senior staff from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Public Health Agency. Their key role will be to ensure that rigorous monitoring arrangements are in place to check that real and rapid improvements are delivered. Additionally, the chief executives and senior officials in the health trusts will be required to walk the wards at least every month, to

check on cleanliness and hygiene levels. That is to be welcomed, as is the recent decrease in hospital-acquired infections, such as *clostridium difficile* and MRSA.

The Committee also notes the additional money promised to ward nurses to help them to remove some of the bureaucratic burden and enable them to do more nursing.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Unfortunately, according to the RCN, that has not yet hit the ground. We hope that it does and that it makes an impact to enable ward nurses and charge nurses to make a more direct and effective change in hospital cleanliness.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Along with the Chairperson of the Committee, I take the opportunity to commend all the staff in the Health Service to date. We have difficulties in the Health Service, but when we get a structured overview of the situation we may start to see improvements.

I apologise on behalf of the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, Michelle O'Neill, who is not here. Unfortunately, she has had to attend hospital this morning with her mother.

From a human point of view, I take the opportunity to wish Iris Robinson a speedy recovery. She is a member of the Health Committee, and, no matter what is going on in the politics of this place, we should not lose sight of the fact that someone is suffering severe mental health problems. I hope that she makes a speedy recovery and that she has not lost out in all of this. I am sure that she will get the help and support that she needs from clinical staff.

I commend the Committee for tabling today's motion. Without criticising other Committees, it shows that the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety is ensuring that issues are brought to the fore in the Assembly and debated. I also welcome the Minister and wish him a happy new year. I am glad that he is here, and I hope that he does well in the coming year. I am also glad that swine flu has not kept him away today; we must be getting good news about swine flu.

For the record, I want to mention the Minister's statement of 24 November 2009. In that statement, he said that he was setting up a new team to drive up cleanliness standards in hospitals and in other healthcare facilities, which is something that we must take on board and welcome. I ask the Minister to update the House on those plans during his contribution to the debate, because, in his statement, the Minister said that there had been:

"significant investment in cleaner and safer care for all patients".

I know that he also made a further £60,000 available as part of that investment.

The RQIA report made both interesting and stark reading, and we must commend the RQIA for that. I do not believe that its inspectors went into the hospitals and did not highlight some of the issues. Approximately 50 inspections were carried out by the RQIA in a two- to three-year period, and it is important that all the reports that it provides, not only those to the Minister and the Department, are followed up on. There is no point in making reports for the sake of it.

That leads me to the point that the Minister made during Question Time today. Politically, he is entitled to make such points, but it strikes me that every time there is an issue in the area of health, the Minister mentions the Budget. If we have had over 50 inspections over the past two to three years to check cleanliness and hygiene and if wards are being closed down for deep cleaning, how much money has been used to ensure that we have clean, proper facilities and that wards are not being closed? Furthermore, will additional money have to be spent on court cases, with people pursuing cases in relation to their relative's care?

When I talk about efficiency in the Health Service, I am talking about accountability and chief executives and senior managers being held to account for the jobs that they are doing. Therefore, I would also appreciate it if the Minister would give the House more details on the walkabouts he is asking senior managers to do, because, if they do not see the problems, they cannot change them.

I know that I have only five minutes in which to speak, and the Chairperson of the Committee has, rightly, already gone into much of the detail of the RQIA report. However, we must challenge some of the behaviour in hospitals, particularly in the children's hospital — part of it is new, and there is still an old building. It was reported to the Committee that dumb-bell plasters were pre-cut and lying around. How long were they lying there? How many infections have they caused? Needles were thrown in with normal waste. All those issues can be easily dealt with, but I am interested in making people accountable for those actions. As the Chairperson has said, if those things had happened in a private business, there would have been an outcry. Hospitals spend public money and provide a public service. We must ensure that the public get all that they are entitled to and senior managers are held to account.

I am glad that the motion has been tabled and that it is one of the first motions of the new year. I hope that all parties will support the Committee's motion and bring back matrons.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms S Ramsey: That will ensure that our hospitals and wards are brought back up to standard.

Mr O'Loan: I want to refer particularly to the hospitals in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area. The results of the inspections there were generally very good and were noticeably better than those for many other trust areas, and I acknowledge what the Chairperson said about that. That was no accident; it was the result of very good management that led to good clinical practice, hygiene and cleaning regimes.

Those results are particularly welcome after the clostridium difficile outbreak in the southern part of the Northern Trust, which affected five hospitals. The outbreak led to fundamental thinking in the trust about its causes and the need to prevent such outbreaks in the future, if possible. There is a process called root cause analysis: clearly, that process was used very effectively.

4.15 pm

I will refer to the previous RQIA reports into the clostridium difficile outbreak, which, in my judgement, are of excellent quality. They are very clear about the causes of the outbreak and the steps to be taken to reduce the risk of such an outbreak happening again. At the outset, I do not think that there is any evidence that the Northern Trust hospitals where the outbreak occurred were particularly predisposed to such an outbreak, either on grounds of cleanliness or any other reason in clinical practice. The outbreak might have occurred elsewhere. That is my own view, and I believe that it is supported by the RQIA reports.

As we know, the outbreak was associated with a very virulent strain of clostridium difficile and the use of antibiotics, which reduce the body's own protection. Therefore, dealing with clostridium difficile was about more than hygiene and cleanliness, vital though those were. The first RQIA report on the clostridium difficile outbreak focused on five measures to minimise the risks: rapid isolation of a patient with diarrhoea; cleanliness of the environment; prudent prescribing of antibiotics; scrupulous hand washing; and personal protective equipment. Those measures were described as a care bundle that needs to be delivered as a package to minimise clostridium difficile infections. I mention them because it is important to recognise that those problems must be tackled in the round. The RQIA also identified pressure on beds and shortage of nurses and cleaning staff as contributory factors. It is important to be aware of all those issues and their contribution.

The trust reacted quickly and effectively to bring the clostridium difficile episode to a conclusion. Many of the measures introduced, as we know, related to hygiene and cleanliness. In October 2008, the trust published its corporate plan for fighting healthcare-

associated infection. That is a very detailed action plan, involving everyone from the trust board and senior management to practitioners and cleaning staff on wards. The success of the plan is to be seen in the very good results found in the trust hospitals in the most recent RQIA report on unannounced inspections, the report named in the motion. Those good results are no accident but are the result of excellent management leading to sound systems and real culture change, which is equally important. I pay tribute to the former chief executive of the trust, Norma Evans, who oversaw the handling of the clostridium difficile outbreak and who was in post when the unannounced inspections took place. I am sure that the Minister will also acknowledge her role.

Page 21 of the overview report states that:

“the trust has adopted many of the recommendations arising from RQIA’s independent review into the outbreak of Clostridium Difficile in the Northern Trust. RQIA has observed sustained improvements across all areas inspected to ensure environmental cleanliness and staff compliance with infection prevention and control practices.

It is notable that those processes and practices are being maintained by the trust.”

I will highlight a couple of other points from the overview report. First, it states that:

“effective clinical leadership at ward level, and above, is essential to ensure that compliance levels are achieved.”

If I have any questions about the motion, they relate to the phrase “Bring back matron”. We should not think that the simplistic ways in which we used to do things will necessarily work now. Nonetheless, the report refers to a link nurse or person for infection prevention and control. I think we are in the same area there.

Secondly, I note the statement that:

“improvements in culture, leadership, cleaning, decluttering, staff knowledge and practice could be achieved at little or no additional cost.”

I referred earlier to a lack of staff as one of the issues that was referred to, so it is not the case that everything could be done at no additional cost, but there are things that could be done by using existing resources better.

Real progress has been made, especially in the Northern Trust. There is more to be done, but the conclusion that I draw is that the mechanisms for dealing with the lack of cleanliness which may lead to hospital-acquired or healthcare-acquired infection are there. It is a matter of putting them in place if they are not there and sustaining them where they are there.

Mr McCallister: Like others, I welcome the debate. The RQIA, as the Chairperson of the Committee mentioned, is a vital component of our health and social care system. It performs a function that is critical to the safety and the smooth working of hospitals and other establishments.

The report on which the motion is based is a necessary component of the state’s ongoing provision of health services. It provides the trusts, the Department and, importantly, the public with a good idea of hygiene standards in our hospitals. It shows where best practice is delivering results and where we have to work to improve standards. The report shows clearly that the Minister’s drive for better standards of cleanliness in hospitals since he took office is bearing fruit. The standard of cleanliness in hospitals is much better today than it was before devolution, and I hope that it will continue to get better.

The report shows good practice and improving standards across Northern Ireland in the vast majority of cases. However, there is room for improvement, particularly in some western areas, and the report recommends some actions that can be taken to further improve standards. The RQIA is in charge of the key function of driving up those standards, and the entire House will welcome that.

The motion rests on the report’s conclusion that:

“RQIA believe that there must be a greater emphasis on clinical leadership and team working to assure hygiene and infection control practice.”

Clinical leadership at ward level is key to the report’s recommendations and to how the RQIA believes that hygiene standards can be taken forward. We could say that clinical leadership is a policy of “Bring back matron”, as some referred to it, or, preferably, we could find language that is not quite as antiquated. Either way, the message is the same, and we must also recognise that directors of nursing already have the powers that the Committee’s motion seeks. To that extent, one could say that matron has never really gone away. Therefore, the proposed changes to clinical leadership at ward level are not such a major departure from current practice.

Those who clean our hospital wards do an excellent job, but it is clear that more can be done through a more strategic approach to hygiene. The RQIA believes that that can be achieved by providing an individual with the responsibility and authority to ensure that standards are met and held in each ward of a hospital. That seems to a sensible approach that can be examined going forward.

As the debate develops, I will remind Members of the year-on-year increase in the workload and throughput of our hospitals. Some people might say that some of the measures can be implemented at a relatively low cost — that is correct — but there are other impacts and pressures on the Health Service budget. As the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety said during Question Time, an increase in demand and throughput that sometimes approaches double-digit percentages is bound to have a significant impact on our Health Service. A month of severe

weather also has an impact on the throughput of our Health Service and can have an impact on the standards that we all wish to be maintained in the Health Service and in hospital wards.

The work of the RQIA is critical in giving the public the confidence that they all want and need in hospital wards.

Dr Deeny: I welcome the motion, and I am delighted and pleased to take part in the debate. When I listened to other Members speak in the debate, I had the thought that the idea of all debates in the House was to improve things.

When we talk about healthcare, we are talking about improving patients' experiences and outcomes. I welcome this debate, because that improvement is what we want. This debate is a matter not of pointing fingers or blaming people but of coming up with a better solution, if there is one, so that the patients' experiences and outcomes are better all round.

As a medical doctor, I must say that, having heard the evidence from the RQIA and from the individual who was extremely keen and who did a lot of research, I was shocked. I agree with some of the statements of my colleagues: had such things happened in a private enterprise, such as a hotel, there would have been repercussions. If some of the things that I saw had happened in a restaurant, one would expect it to be closed down. We are talking about hospitals, and, therefore, there is no excuse.

One thing that struck me when I first read the report was the terrible irony. On the one hand we have the Royal Victoria Hospital, which everyone, not only health professionals, should be very proud of. It is world-renowned and provides gold standard treatments in neurosurgery and traumatology as a result of our awful time during the Troubles. Wonderful services and surgical procedures are available to promote health and to save lives. Yet, on the other hand, not too far away, in the same hospital, we can see situations that can actually make health worse. When hygiene is a problem, patients are more likely to get infections and their health is liable to suffer.

Having taken a look at the matter with interest, we can see where bureaucracy and administration are needed. However, we can over-bureaucratise and over-administer. We can see that bureaucracy can have a detrimental and negative effect on patients' health.

I asked the representatives of the trust who they would go to if they found a hygiene problem on the ward. The answer, which was, "It depends", was the correct one, but it explains the situation. I asked what it would depend on, and I was told that it would depend on where the incident took place. That is the problem. My understanding is that, if a problem occurs in the corridor, it is the responsibility of one person; if

it is to do with a bed, it is the responsibility of someone else; and if it is to do with the laundry, it is the responsibility of someone else. That is the situation. As the Committee Chairperson said, too many people have responsibility, yet no one has responsibility. As recently as last week, Members of the Committee were shown the management structure for dealing with hygiene problems in a hospital. It was a web-like diagram with lines and boxes, and it was completely confusing. That is what we want to break down.

The call to bring back matron has been mentioned. Those were the good old days. It is not a sexist remark, as some people say, and it is not antiquated or dated. We are talking about the concept of having one person in charge of the ward to whom staff or patients can go if there is a problem. That person, whether a ward sister or a charge nurse, must be totally in control of his or her ward and take responsibility. To reiterate what the Committee Chairperson said, that has nothing to do with cost or additional staff; it is to do with the delegation of responsibility. That person must have full and complete authority. I saw that in action when I started work in the early 1980s, and it was a part of the Health Service prior to that. If that person was approached about any deficiency — let us say hygiene — that person had the authority to crack the whip and sort it out, and it was done. That is how it worked.

Having read the medical journals from the different countries that are covered by our Health Service, I believe that health professionals — the doctors, nurses, etc — would like to see the structure streamlined, clear and uncomplicated. We in Northern Ireland can take the lead and set an example —

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

Dr Deeny: If we go down that route, we will be followed by the other countries. I urge Members to support the motion.

Mr Easton: Two major challenges confront us in the RQIA report. Those are to comprehensively address infection prevention and to promote hygiene in our hospitals through best practice.

4.30 pm

When a patient enters hospital, he or she rightly expects the environment to be hygienic. More than that, he or she correctly expects the highest standard of hygiene. I do not need to detail to the House all the medical knowledge on the links between proper hygiene and good health or the particular need for hygiene following surgery. At a time when the body is laid low through illness, there must be good hygiene to aid recovery. I hold that to be self evident.

Therefore, the House wisely sets its face to acknowledging the outcome of the Regulation and

Quality Improvement Authority's first overview report on the hygiene and infection-control inspections across hospitals in this part of the United Kingdom. I will put it bluntly: those reports must not be allowed to gather dust on a shelf. Frankly, there is no point in having the reports if we do not give to them due diligence and appropriate action. It would be criminal not to respond to outcomes that effectively address the issues.

Let us also pay tribute where it is due. There have been significant improvements in hygiene, but there have also been some serious exceptions to that, mainly in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. As a result of the report, safer care and hygiene has been introduced, resulting in greater public confidence in the cleanliness of the acute care environment. So, fair play to the dedicated women and men who are delivering those tangible improvements. We have benefited from their labours, and we are grateful.

As I turn to the areas of further improvements, I pay tribute to the staff in our hospitals as we learn to do better together. I personally received the care and excellence of our rightly revered NHS, and I appreciated at first hand the diligence of the hospital staff without exception. The report should be read as encouraging them to go forward and make further progress on hygiene. I do not need to dwell on the standardisation of good practice across the trusts, but let us build on the improvement culture by sharing practice that is good and noteworthy, thereby maximising benefits. Let us measure ourselves and see tangibly and visibly the progress that we make via the audit tool and infection-rate displays. Let management come from the comfort of the office to the proverbial coalface — namely, the hospital wards — where they may witness at first hand the status of the ward and, therefore, work more intelligently.

Let us celebrate that which is good. Our inspectors have noted the hand hygiene environmental audit displays. They have witnessed the promotion of hand hygiene from the hospital entrance to the ward. They have acknowledged the deep environmental clean on a four- to six-month basis in the Northern Trust. We appreciate the work of the staff in building clutter-free wards and departments, and the tidiness and good management of the same. We fully appreciate that those outcomes have been achieved at the expense of hard-working staff. Importantly, we see the displays of areas identified by RQIA for improvement, which will help our staff to work towards the improvement goals.

The use of the link professional or link nurse, introduced to manage infection control, has proven beneficial, as has the use of the regional infection control manual and the use of technology in the e-learning programme. I ask that the high-impact interventions, referred to as bundles of care, which are designed and targeted at reducing infection in clinical

practice, be continued. The House is thankful, and it looks in admiration at the detail that has gone into the cleaning schedules of domestic and nursing staff.

Let me turn to the team of Health Service staff. We have a great team of people working in our Health Service, which requires energy and care. Staff members work, literally, day and night, going about their vocation 24/7 and giving of themselves whether it is Christmas Day or a regular day of the week. It is a timeless team that we give our thanks to. RQIA has detailed the staff enthusiasm and commitment to work. We know the old adage: where there's a will, there's a way. We are seeing real changes in hospital hygiene as a result of that team's professional will. That positive attitude will bring real benefits.

I turn to "bringing back matron". How beneficial was the role of a matron. When we removed the matrons, we may have been guilty of breaking that most important rule: when it's not broken, don't try to fix it. The matron's role, which often figures in British comedy, is in reality anything but a laughing matter. I encourage the Minister to revisit the best practice of the past, compare and contrast it with what went before and implement that policy which is most effective with regard to hygiene in our Health Service.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As a member of the Health Committee, I support the motion.

I will start by concentrating on the last lines of the Committee's motion. Mention has been made of the phrase "bring back matron". When people hear those words, they think of cleanliness and hygiene in the context of what happens when someone is a visitor or a patient in hospital and of the whole hospital environment. When people say "bring back matron", there is a sense that matron had the authority to say: "That is not right; I want it sorted." Perhaps that view is too simplistic and too nostalgic or perhaps it is not entirely accurate, but I believe that there is something in it.

Somebody who had been in hospital recently told me that they had seen a mop and bucket in a toilet cubicle and that paper was littered on the floor. That was not what that person expected. Toilets and showers should be particularly clean. The person who relayed that to me was not entirely happy with the situation. Despite the procedures that are in place, this latest report, and the good work of the RQIA in monitoring and assessing, hospitals are still not as clean as they should be.

From March 2008 to September 2009, a suite of 18 reports was carried out, and yet the lack of cleanliness in hospitals has not been completely sorted. In considering the issue, I wondered whether there is too much bureaucracy around reporting and assessing, and

I am inclined to think that there is. The procedure involved in an RQIA assessment includes unannounced inspections, observations, questioning patients and staff and a report that comes back after 20 working days. I also wondered about what a working day in a hospital is, as it is unclear whether 20 working days is four weeks or Mondays, Tuesdays, Saturdays and Sundays. Whichever it is, that is a considerable amount of time.

I go back to the point that I made at the beginning: if a matron saw something lying in a corridor, she would tell somebody to sort it out. Although work is being done, we must look again at all the processes and procedures.

Finally, I spoke to a patient recently who said that — I was very disappointed about this because it happened in a hospital in my area — a soiled and blood-stained cloth lay under a chair beside the bed for a day and a half before it was lifted.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs McGill: Although there is good work being done, I think that there is still more work to do.

Mr Shannon: I congratulate the Members for tabling the motion. The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority made unannounced visits to hospitals between May and September 2009, and the report that followed was labelled by the media as a “damning hygiene report”. Whatever is said today, and Members have made the issues very clear, it has to lead to improvement. That is what we are looking for.

Unfortunately, the hospitals identified as being in need of real and speedy change included the Ulster Hospital in my area of Strangford. The RQIA report stated that four areas of the Ulster Hospital had failed to meet required hygiene standards in almost every way, which is quite worrying. The Ulster Hospital faced some of the strongest criticism across all the inspections: inspectors saw staff failing to wash their hands before handling food and after contact with patients; gloves that should have been used only once were reused; clutter made proper cleaning difficult; and a dirty and poorly made ice-making machine had to be condemned after the inspection as it was identified as an *E. coli* risk. In the medical assessment unit — and the Member who spoke previously about things being left for a day and a half will love this — the inspectors found three mattresses that had been condemned almost a year before, lying on a floor and blocking a domestic supply store.

Hooiiver tha repoart haes saed that it wull nae tak twau mutch fer tae mak thees things better an indeed thees cud aw be brought aboot at little er nae extra coast. It is cleer that tha daes o' tha matron haes tae be brought bak, an it is simply nae enouch fer tha Depertmunt tae lay doon laas an regulatshuns an no fer

tae folly them richt throo. Tha power shud be gien tae tha ward sisters tae folly throo.

However, the report said that it would not take much to make improvements and that those could be achieved at little or no additional cost. It is clear that the days of the matron must be brought back. It is simply not enough for the Department to lay down rules and regulations without following through on them or giving ward sisters the power to do so.

Let me make it quite clear that a large number of hospital staff do the best that they can. However, there is room for improvement. I want to highlight a case that illustrates the issue. Not long ago, I was forced to approach the Minister with respect to hygiene in the Ulster Hospital and the issue of MRSA. I asked the Minister questions using the question format at Stormont to ascertain how MRSA swabs and testing were done. I received an answer from him. However, back in May 2009, one of my constituents came to me about an MRSA incident at the Ulster Hospital that flew in the face of the Minister's answers to my questions.

There is great disagreement over how swabs and testing are done and around the follow up for those people who are open to the most contagious disease. On 20 January 2009, one of my constituents was admitted to the Ulster Hospital A&E and had a boil lanced. She was moved from A&E to a ward and was kept in hospital for five days before being released. At no stage was her GP or family informed that MRSA was present. The ward has a duty to inform the GP and the trust. However, as the lady in question had left the ward before the results were returned, no one was willing to take responsibility, after her discharge, for informing the patient's GP who, in turn, would have let the carers, district nurses and family know. No one was told, and I believe that that was a disaster waiting to happen.

Worse still, the lady released was present among other family members with wounds, including one person who was recovering from cancer and who had an epileptic child who also had a cut. No confirmation of MRSA was given to the family or to the community nurses who were working closely with them. All of that was happening, yet, in answer to my questions AQW 7113, AQW 7114 and AQW 7115, the Minister said that following the submission of swabs to screen for MRSA, a preliminary result is available and, after a further 48 hours, confirmation of the results is available and is passed to the GP, the trust and family members. The answer stated that most patients were discharged by that time. On this occasion, the patient was still at hospital when the results should have been ready. However, no one was informed. The only reason it was discovered was that it was written in her chart. That was only investigated weeks later when the lady's sister noticed a tag attached to her clothes which said “infectious disease”. She queried that tag and

wondered why it was there. Had she not done so, the family still would not have known, and that could have been potentially life-threatening to a great many people.

When I speak to older nurses, I am told that the problems on the wards would not have happened in their day. I realise the stress and strain that wards are under. However, I believe that the Department has a responsibility to enable the wards —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close please. The Minister has been told what has to be done. I ask him to act on that, and I look forward to his response.

4.45 pm

Mr Gardiner: In November last year, the Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey, said that he was setting up a new team to drive up cleanliness standards in hospitals and other healthcare facilities. The team, which was to include senior staff from the Department and the Public Health Agency, would report to him on a monthly basis and its remit would be to ensure that rigorous monitoring arrangements were in place to deliver real and rapid improvements in cleanliness.

It is only fair to say that over the past two years, the Minister has made a significant investment in cleaning and in safer care for all patients. In addition, although the RQIA report in November criticised performances, particularly in hospitals in the Northern Trust and the Western Trust areas, there were still areas of real improvement in hygiene and cleanliness elsewhere. Provisional figures last November already show that there was a fall of 30% in infections, including MRSA and clostridium difficile.

The Minister insisted that chief executives and senior officials in health trusts walk the wards at least once every month to check the cleanliness and hygiene levels. He also insisted that a toolkit to help ward staff to identify and monitor problems should be supplied and said that domestic cleaning staff would receive additional support.

The Health Committee, of which I am a member, wants to work in partnership with the Minister in helping to drive a programme of greater cleanliness in our hospitals and health facilities. Cleaner and safer hospitals are our common objectives. Ward sisters and charge nurses have a key role in ensuring that the wards are clean and fit for purpose as well as ensuring that patients receive the highest quality of care. It is important that ward managers are given the right level of authority so that they can organise simple tasks, such as cleaning when it is required, and ensure the correct level of staffing at all times. It is essential that ward managers do not have to go through several tiers of bureaucracy to get anything done.

The Minister announced a £2 million investment to support ward managers at the Royal College of

Nursing Northern Ireland Nurse of the Year Awards last June. That investment has been delayed because of budgetary factors and swine flu contingency measures. Support from the Executive and the Finance Minister for those contingency measures was far from clear for several months.

The Minister also announced a £60 million pilot scheme to ensure more effective cleaning of wards. Four wards were selected for the pilot, which will involve cleaners ensuring that equipment and surfaces that are regularly touched, such as door handles, are cleaned even more frequently.

I welcome all that has been done so far. I know that the Minister, who already raised the bar in the Health Service for patients in Northern Ireland, has the matter in his sights. I want to see more success and have every confidence that Minister McGimpsey will deliver.

Mrs D Kelly: As a member of the Health Committee, I support the report. It is worth noting that only a truly independent watchdog could have produced such a report, and the inspectors are to be commended for their work. It is also worthwhile to note that the increase in MRSA, clostridium difficile and other such infections are not just down to hygiene. As we have been told by people in the medical profession, it is also due to an over reliance on, and the misuse, of antibiotics. We also have to remember, as stated in the report, that some patients are admitted to hospital having already acquired the infection at home. That is worth noting.

I worked in the Health Service for 22 years and was a manager in the community sector. To be frank, I was absolutely flabbergasted by the report, particularly some of the images. Some of the issues concern the basics and are a matter of common sense. Some of the imagery in the report is a result of people not doing their job or looking over their shoulder and waiting for a colleague on the next shift to do the job. As other Members said, one person, whether he or she is a matron or a ward manager, should be in charge and direct resources to resolve the problem.

Many of the difficulties did not arise overnight. They arose over many years of changes to the Health Service under, for example, compulsive competitive tendering, through which cleaning services were contracted out of the Health Service. Such services properly lie in the Health Service under the direct line management of hospital staff. That is not to say that many people from private or public firms have not done a good job. However, accountability mechanisms should be in place, and the person in charge of the ward should be able to direct resources, control overtime and order supplies.

The Chairperson and Dr Deeny rightly said that everyone is interested in the same outcome. We are

all interested in improving the standards of care for patients. The report goes to the heart of public confidence in our Health Service. During discussions with constituents, I am sure that many Members have heard anecdotal evidence of people not wanting to go into hospital because they are afraid of leaving in a much worse state. The improvements in recent months are critical to restoring public faith in the standards of hygiene in our hospitals.

Two of my constituents — both young women who lead busy lives and have young children — have hospital-acquired infections that require them to visit hospital periodically for treatment. That has impacted adversely on their lives. Furthermore, it has consequences for demands on the Health Service because they require inpatient treatment for their hospital-acquired infections. Those are serious matters. Not only can people acquire debilitating illnesses, there have been cases, more so across the water, of people dying prematurely as a direct result of contracting MRSA or clostridium difficile.

As Mr Gardiner said, the Minister has given serious consideration to the matter. As the reports show, it is in all our interests to establish clear accountability mechanisms. The Southern Trust area, which I represent, has achieved tremendous results in recent months and has improved procedures to include audit trails and an accountability mechanism to determine who is in charge. I am sure that the Health Minister, as the sole person in overall charge, will be listening carefully to the debate. He will consider the report's findings and will want all hospitals to reach the same high standards.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should bring her remarks to a close.

Mrs D Kelly: The report shows that trusts in which one person is in charge and is clearly accountable achieved better results.

Mr G Robinson: I support and commend all NHS staff throughout Northern Ireland. Given that I have worked on behalf of my constituent Mr Gerry Bond on one of the most notorious recent cases of poor hygiene and its consequences, I fully support the motion.

In my constituent's case, the lack of hygiene control almost cost his grandson his life. Such a situation must never happen again, and, therefore, the entire Assembly must support the motion. To demonstrate my concerns, I refer the Minister and Members to pages 11 to 13 of the RQIA's report, which was published in November 2009, on infection prevention and hygiene inspections, especially the report on ward 4F of the Royal Victoria Hospital.

When my constituent first contacted me, I doubted the reality of his concerns. As more information became available and I saw evidence of the truly appalling state of that particular ward, I was stunned

by the true scale of the problem. As the RQIA report states, the problems lay mainly in:

“hand hygiene practices and ... ensuring that patient equipment is clean and ready to use. In ward 4F this concern also focused on the minimal score achieved in the area of clinical practice.”

Those are areas that should be of the greatest priority. I cannot understand why hygiene levels were permitted to fall to such a low standard. After all, that ward is part of a world-famous and respected neurological unit. Its staff do a magnificent job that should not be jeopardised by basic hygiene issues.

The 29 May 2009 inspection was damning of the conditions on ward 4F, which resulted in the closure of the ward kitchen. However, the Minister had known about my constituent's concerns about hygiene in that ward since 15 September 2008, when he met both of us to discuss the matter. I would appreciate an explanation from the Minister as to why it took almost nine months for an inspection to be carried out when he knew about serious concerns, raised through me, about hygiene on ward 4F. Sadly, that is not the only ward in Northern Ireland to suffer appallingly low scores, which leads me to conclude that the problem lies in the enforcement system. That problem can be addressed quickly and without any major cost implications for the various trusts.

Equally, not all hospitals in Northern Ireland have the same poor practices. We only have to look to the Northern Trust hospitals for examples of good cleanliness practices. It is not difficult to ensure high levels of hand hygiene among staff, the regular cleaning of patient equipment and overall cleanliness levels in functional areas of wards. As I discovered from my constituent's complaint, hygiene reports were not done to the frequency required, and, therefore, it is impossible to establish how long the situation had remained undiscovered before the May 2009 inspection exposed the reality.

My constituent's testimony leads me to believe that the situation had been going on for too long. The report on the Royal Victoria Hospital inspection reveals that air vents and the fins of fans were dusty. That is completely unacceptable. That report reveals the revolting state of the toilets: I will spare Members the details, but I encourage them to read the report for themselves. Those cleanliness issues were purely down to lack of attention to detail, which could cost lives.

It is, therefore, important that infection prevention and ward hygiene become the responsibility of individuals and the ward team as a whole and are subject to strict and regular inspections. I believe, as stated in the motion, that “bringing back matron” is the most cost-effective and practical way of ensuring that hygiene standards are of the highest level in every hospital ward in Northern Ireland. It is essential that the authority to enforce hygiene and cleanliness is

given to an individual and that there are clearly defined repercussions if failure to maintain standards is commonplace on a ward.

I urge all Members to support the motion to keep our hospitals clean and safe for patients. A lack of basic hygiene could cost lives, and every Member should find that totally unacceptable. I support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): First, I wish to acknowledge the contribution of our nursing, medical and cleaning staff and the public, who are working so hard to make our hospitals cleaner and safer. Every year, over 6 million people use our healthcare facilities, including staff, the many thousands of patients who receive care and treatment, and the relatives and friends who visit them. What is more, demand for hospital services is rising at unprecedented rates; it is up 9% this year and was up 12% the year before. We are treating more and more people every year, and our staff are stretched to the limit to deal with the increasing demand for services with the limited resources that are available.

Despite the considerable pressures that they face, our staff have succeeded in achieving a significant reduction in infections. MRSA rates have dropped by 30%, and clostridium difficile rates have fallen by a remarkable 40% over the past 18 months. Rates of MRSA infection have now reached the lowest level since reporting began in 2001, while clostridium difficile numbers are at the lowest level since mandatory surveillance began in 2005.

5.00 pm

Despite that outstanding achievement, we face calls to place warning notices on hospital doors. Rather than praise our staff for driving down infections and protecting patients, some prefer to criticise and demoralise them, thereby undermining public confidence without acknowledging the real success that has been achieved. However, we cannot afford to be complacent.

The ever increasing number of people using our services represents a significant challenge to driving down the rate of infection. It is vital that we strengthen leadership in our hospitals and that we have effective accountability in place from the ward to the board.

Changing the Culture has been an overarching strategy for tackling healthcare-associated infections. That strategy has two key principles: the prevention and control of infection is a core part of healthcare; and that it is everyone's responsibility. In advancing that strategy, I announced a range of measures two years ago that are supported by new money. Those measures included the development of a hospital visiting policy; a dress code for healthcare staff; a regional hand-hygiene programme; rapid-response

cleaning teams in hospitals; funding for a pharmacist in each trust to promote the safer prescribing of antibiotics; and the rolling programme of unannounced hospital inspections.

I commissioned the reports. Claire McGill mentioned the bureaucracy of compiling 18 reports, but it has to be done. One cannot commend the reports and then complain about the bureaucracy behind them. I commissioned the RQIA to carry out the inspections in 2008. RQIA is one of the tools that I use to drive up standards in the Health Service. It works across private nursing and residential homes as well as in public healthcare facilities. I commission reports from the RQIA, which provides the reports to me before they are published.

The purpose of those inspections is to identify areas that require action and areas from which lessons need to be learned. Those reports are a snapshot of hygiene and infection control standards in specific areas of the facility on the day of a visit. They are not intended to be, and should not be taken as, representative of standards in our hospitals over a period.

Members should remember that trusts are required to produce comprehensive and detailed action plans to address shortcomings found during inspections, and trusts are working to implement those plans speedily. There will be more unannounced inspections. As we continue with the existing measures and the further measures that I have announced, we will continue to use the tool of unannounced inspections to drive up standards in health and social care facilities.

I assure Members that I take the issue very seriously. The public must be confident that our hospitals are clean and safe, and that is why I announced in November further tough action to improve hygiene and cleanliness. That includes setting up a new team to drive up cleanliness standards in hospitals and a team comprising senior staff from the Department and the Public Health Agency to report to me on a monthly basis. That team's role will be to ensure that rigorous monitoring arrangements are in place to check that real and rapid improvements are being delivered.

In addition, I have required that trust chief executives, along with senior officials, walk the wards at least every month to check on cleanliness. I announced that we will develop a toolkit for ward staff to monitor the state of hospital wards and to provide additional support and advice for domestic cleaning staff. Each trust has identified a director-level member of staff who has overall responsibility for hygiene and cleanliness in that organisation.

As part of the new measures, I have secured funding for a back-to-basics pilot scheme to ensure the more effective cleaning of wards. That scheme is being run

in partnership between UNISON and the Royal College of Nursing.

It is one of those issues. We talk, rightly, about doctors, nurses, allied health professionals, and so on. However, a hospital cannot be run without cleaners, porters and maintenance staff any more than it can be run without administrators.

The developments should be seen within our wider policy of reducing healthcare-associated infections. I referred to the Changing the Culture strategy, which covered the period 2006-09. Today, I will launch a new regional strategic plan, which will be entitled Changing the Culture 2010. The new strategy will bring together the priority areas of work that need to be delivered to speed up the progress that we have made in reducing infections.

Turning to environmental cleanliness, we have the Cleanliness Matters strategy. It identified a range of issues that need to be addressed, such as developing the capability and capacity of cleaning services and ensuring that people who use the Health Service are involved in measuring standards. That strategy is being revised, and I have commissioned a new plan to ensure that standards are improved continually.

I said that the debate is essentially about leadership and accountability. It has been claimed that there is a lack of accountability for cleanliness. However, that is not true. The chief executive of each trust has primary responsibility for ensuring that the cleanliness standards are met. In addition, all managers and staff are responsible for adhering to those standards. Serious breaches of policy and continual non-compliance should be reported to the person who is responsible for taking the necessary action.

I will turn to the call to bring back matrons and to provide nursing ward managers with the support and authority that they need to do their work effectively. Under the healthcare reforms of the 1960s and 1970s, the role of matron was replaced with that of director of nursing. The reality, however, is that the role of director of nursing has developed differently in trusts and with different levels of responsibility. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the focus has been on developing and strengthening the role of the ward sister. In England, the Department of Health has been able to invest in modern matrons, with a focus on improving the patient experience.

I have asked the Chief Nursing Officer to work with trust chief executives to look carefully at the role of the directors of nursing across all our trusts. It is important that they have all the authority that they need to take on the role of the traditional matron. Effectively, matron has not gone away; matron has been redesignated with increased responsibilities. Healthcare and the Health Service have changed

dramatically in the past 20 or 30 years, and those roles must change accordingly. That is why I talk about the authority to ensure that the care for patients is of the highest standards throughout our trusts. As directors of nursing, they must ensure that ward sisters are supported in their leadership of care at ward level, wherever that might be in the trust.

It is important to remember that although we must empower the directors of nursing to enable them to carry out their role fully, the consensus of professional opinion in Northern Ireland is that we must support the ward sisters. I have held discussions with the Royal College of Nursing to find out what it believes needs to be done to strengthen the role of the ward sister. When members of the public are asked who they believe is in charge of a ward, they invariably answer "the ward sister". Our hospitals have changed; they are much larger and more complex and offer a range of differing and specialist services to patients.

We must look to ward sisters to have the authority to run their wards, and we must ensure that we support them in doing so. They deliver a 24-hour service that links all aspects of the patient experience. It is the ward sister to whom the public look to set and uphold standards, including cleanliness. I want to ensure that they have all the necessary help and support to carry out that role effectively. I also want to ensure that whenever ward sisters walk on to their wards, they have the authority to take control of every aspect of everything that happens in their area. That is why I made a commitment last year to explore what additional support could be provided to the ward sister.

Following a review that was undertaken by the Chief Nursing Officer, in June 2009, I announced a phased allocation of money that will increase to £2 million recurrently in 2010-11. That was to support an initiative to release 20% of a ward sister's time. Unfortunately, I was unable initially to proceed with the funding because of budget constraints and the swine flu pandemic. Now, however, I can allocate the necessary funding to trusts. It will allow trusts to bring forward proposals for releasing at least 20% of ward sisters' time to focus on quality, safety and patient experience issues.

In addition, I have allocated an extra £500,000 in general capital for schemes such as the minor refurbishment of hospital wards. That additional funding will allow ward sisters who are in hard-pressed areas to invest up to £2,000. I will ensure that that money is directed towards those wards in which needs are greatest.

We have also, under the Chief Nursing Officer, established a regional steering group to develop a framework and generic job description for ward sisters, to initiate an introduction programme to support newly

appointed sisters, and to develop a toolkit of resources that will support ward sisters in their roles. In addition, I have had discussions with the Royal College of Nursing and asked it to come back to me with measures that it thinks are necessary to allow us to re-establish what Members are looking for: ward sisters being back in charge of wards. That is how it used to be and how I understood it to be. That is the direction in which I am travelling. It seems that that is what is meant by “bring back matron”.

The debate is useful in that we have an intolerance of practices in our health and social care system that do not come up to the standards that we require. I take measures as necessary. It is important to stress that the incidence of healthcare-associated infections shows that this work, which has been ongoing for the past two and a half years, is bearing fruit. We are making progress and we will continue to do so.

However, it is not all plain sailing. For example, I instituted a visiting policy because there was previously a laissez-faire approach to visitors. It seemed that an unlimited number of people were able to be around a bed at any time of the day or night. We set visiting times and limited visitor numbers to two per bed. Recently, in Erne Hospital, members of staff were seriously abused by visitors because they tried to enforce the two-per-bed rule. That happens when staff deal with the general public regarding issues of hygiene and patient safety. It is a matter of creating respect for the staff whom the general public meet in hospitals.

That is not always apparent. Not every ward sister feels that she has the authority to tackle visitors who are perhaps behaving in a way that they should not. That should be on everybody's agenda. We all have a part to play; we cannot simply leave it to ward sisters or matrons, or come up with clever schemes. The Health Service belongs to all of us, so we should all take responsibility for it, including the budget, which Sue Ramsey mentioned. I have been asking the House to do that for the Health Service for some time. It is also about supporting staff rather than finding fault. People should not think that naming and shaming is always the way to deal with issues. The RQIA is not simply about inspection; it is about improvement. I am its inspector, and I will make sure that it also comes up to the mark.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On behalf of the Committee, I thank the Members who took part in the debate. Going into hospital for an operation or any length of stay is a worrying prospect for most people. On top of that, people should not have to worry about whether the ward is clean or whether they will catch an infection while in hospital. That is why the Committee welcomes the RQIA reports. They help to build public confidence because they show that someone

somewhere is keeping an eye on hygiene and infections and that things are improving.

In many ways, the motion is about going back to basics. That is why it uses the word “matron”; it conjures up a time when people perceived that things were better. Every time I hear the word matron, the image of Hattie Jacques appears in my mind, but that shows my age to the vast majority in the Chamber who do not know who I am talking about. However, that is the type of person I imagine. It conjures up a time when things were better, when hospitals were cleaner and infections rarely happened. People put that down to the fact that there was someone clearly in charge — a matron. Today, that job is done by charge nurses or ward managers, but somehow, somewhere, the authority and respect that came with the position of matron has been eroded.

5.15 pm

The old matrons commanded huge respect in hospitals. Their word was law and they oversaw all aspects of patient care, including cleaning and catering. Hospitals grew bigger, and more and more patients came through the doors for more complicated and complex reasons. Nursing structures were modernised to cope with the changing demands placed on hospitals. Somewhere along the line, that figure of authority who commanded respect, and whose word was law when it came to cleaning, was lost.

In essence, the motion is about a clear point of authority, someone having ultimate charge and that person being accountable. The RQIA overview report has noted the lack of effective leadership, which contributed to a lack of hygiene in some hospitals. The Committee heard informally from the Royal College of Nursing that it also believed that the effective authority of charge nurses had been eroded. Therefore, it was plain that the culture in hospitals today is to make everybody responsible for cleanliness.

That is not in itself a bad idea. Indeed, one would wish to see it encouraged. The problem is that somehow that concept has come to mean that no one is responsible. The motion proposes that one person is given that power, authority and accountability. It was a shock to find that no one in the Royal Victoria Hospital had been held responsible for the serious failings in hygiene.

The Committee welcomes what has been done by the Minister regarding the task force and in making the chief executives walk the wards. While the Minister spoke about that, one question occurred to me: will those walks be pre-notified or spontaneous and unannounced? That is important.

Various Members raised points during the debate. Sue Ramsey paid tribute to the former Chairperson of the Committee and an outgoing Member, Iris Robinson. I think that it is important, at this point in

the debate, that we pay tribute to the enormous contribution that Iris Robinson made to the whole issue of the scrutiny of health and social care in Northern Ireland. It would be remiss, particularly on this day, not to take that opportunity to do so.

Sue Ramsey also mentioned the issue of accountability, which was a recurring theme. In her opinion, and, I think, the opinion of us all, there does not seem to be that one point of contact who is ultimately accountable for hygiene standards.

I welcome Declan O'Loan's contribution. Apart from some of my colleagues, he was the only Member to speak who does not sit on the Committee. That is very welcome, because sometimes these debates tend to be the Committee talking to itself, which is a retrograde step. Mr O'Loan quite rightly paid tribute to the success in hygiene of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, which serves the area that he represents. On a personal level, my mother-in-law passed away in Antrim Area Hospital almost a year ago to the day, and I must say that I was extremely impressed during my regular visits at the standard of hygiene and care given to Mrs Wallace in that hospital. Therefore, I concur with Mr O'Loan.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: My wife had to go into Antrim Area Hospital for a few days recently, and when she came home, she was very enthusiastic about the level of cleaning that was carried out in the hospital. We ought to pay tribute to the work that has been done there.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I had the opportunity to make exactly the same point earlier and to mention the fact that the Rev Coulter had paid tribute to that hospital.

John McCallister mentioned many instances of good practice in various trusts. It was uncanny that he spontaneously mentioned the 9% increase in demand on hospitals. Quite amazingly, the Minister mentioned exactly the same point — such coincidences.

Mr McCallister: That is what the Minister does at Question Time.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Yes, and I was just about to say that exactly the same stats were repeated at Question Time by other colleagues. Is the coincidence of people making totally independent judgements about what they are going to say but coming out with the same thing spooky or not?

Mr Beggs: Is the Chairman of the Committee saying that he is not aware of the Minister having used that statistic many weeks, indeed months, ago?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Yes, he has on

many occasions. One would even allege collusion between Members, but that would be a totally dishonourable thing to say. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Deeny, who has a lot of experience at the sharp end, mentioned that if some of those hospitals had been private companies, heads would have rolled. The most shocking evidence that the Committee heard was that no one was disciplined for what happened. He raised an important issue about the complexity of the present management structure when reporting hygiene shortcomings. Indeed, when giving evidence to the Committee, Mr Bond produced a flow chart that showed the plethora of committees, bodies and management structures that are responsible for such matters. Frankly, it was unintelligible. That evidence emphasised again that there should be one person to crack the whip and to make it clear that certain standards are unacceptable.

Alex Easton paid tribute to the staff and referred to the control manual and the link nurse, which are important issues. Maybe Claire McGill can remember Hattie Jacques, or maybe she is too young, but —

Mr Beggs: She is only 36.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety: If she is 36, maybe she cannot. Nevertheless, she referred to having a ward sister or matron with the power to get things sorted. The Committee was impressed by comments about Sister Eugene, who used to have ultimate and total control in the Mater Infirmorum Hospital, and the fear that she instilled in the hearts of every member of staff the moment that she walked in. As Mr Bond said, it was not a matter of referring things to a management committee or some formal structure, it was get it clean and woe betide you if she came back at noon and it was not done. Maybe we need a return to that level of authority.

In the middle of his contribution, Jim Shannon broke into Ulster Scots, which surprised most of us. Nevertheless, he raised a very worrying case about the accidental discovery of MRSA in his constituency. I hope that that matter will be pursued, because it strikes me as being an unacceptable way to deal with an important issue.

Alderman Sam Gardiner raised the issue of unannounced visits and the 30% fall in infections. He also mentioned the toolkit, which is a welcome development.

Dolores Kelly, who is from the same area, emphasised the fact that the RQIA is a truly independent watchdog. That is very important, and creating a body that is totally independent from the Department and the private sector has been a good move. When things go wrong, the RQIA has extensive powers to investigate; that should be emphasised.

George Robinson, who has given valiant support to the Bond family, raised the specific case about which Mr Bond gave evidence. We owe a debt of gratitude to Mr Bond for raising those issues because, without his determination, some of them would not have come into the public domain.

The Minister launched a stout defence of his Department, again mentioning the 9% increase in demand and the six million users a year. It was significant that he announced a new strategy: Changing the Culture 2010. If the Committee achieves nothing other than that announcement, it will be good news. The Minister also announced a new look at the role of the director of nursing, which is good news and may bring about the change in culture that we need. I am also pleased that he announced that the £2 million that was promised is now to be spent. Although it is a bit overdue, at least it is good to know. It was disturbing to hear that there are those who visit hospitals who are not prepared to work alongside medical staff to improve hygiene standards.

My time is running out fast, but the debate has been useful. I thank the Members who participated, and I look forward to the Minister's delivering on the various promises that he made in his speech.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority's Overview Report on infection prevention/hygiene inspections (November 2009) which states that there must be a greater emphasis on clinical leadership and team-working to assure hygiene and infection control practice; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to "bring back matron"; and to provide nursing ward managers with the support and authority to do their work effectively.

Adjourned at 5.24 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 12 January 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

EU Fisheries Council: December 2009

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement on the outcome of the December Fisheries Council meeting.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the outcome of the autumn negotiations on various fisheries matters and, in particular, the Fisheries Council meeting that was held in Brussels on 14 and 15 December, which determined fishing opportunities for 2010.

On 16 November 2009, we had a useful debate in the Assembly ahead of the November and December Fisheries Council meetings. When speaking to the Fisheries Council motion, I alerted Members to the possible impacts of a proposed technical conservation regulation to be agreed at the November Fisheries Council meeting. It aimed to promote the conservation of fisheries and resources by, among other things, laying down detailed requirements for fishing gear and minimum landing sizes for fish.

The draft regulation included a requirement for a uniform minimum landing size of 25 mm for nephrops throughout EU waters. At that time, I explained to Members that there was no evidence to support increasing the minimum landing size from 20 mm to 25 mm in the Irish Sea for conservation reasons and that raising the minimum landing size for Irish Sea nephrops would have a devastating effect on local industry, both in the catching and processing sectors.

It became evident during the November Fisheries Council meeting that many member states thought that the proposed regulation was seriously flawed. Attempts by the Swedish presidency to broker a compromise saw a new version emerge that made

many changes that were designed to accommodate those concerns. The changes included dropping the proposal for a uniform minimum landing size for nephrops and a transition period of two years to adopt technical changes to certain towed gears. Regrettably, the European Commission felt that it could not support the presidency compromise. In those circumstances, the draft regulation needed to have unanimous support from the Fisheries Council to succeed. In the Fisheries Council plenary session, it became clear that that would not be possible. As a consequence, the draft regulation was withdrawn.

The fate of the technical conservation regulation is now in the hands of the Spanish presidency, and, as yet, there is no firm timetable for when a new regulation will be brought forward. The ratification of the Lisbon Treaty means that this area of fisheries policy will be taken forward under the process of co-decision, and the European Parliament will become an equal partner in the making of fisheries legislation. Therefore, there will be an opportunity for our MEPs to influence that policy and future fisheries legislation.

During the December Council meeting, my priority was to resist the proposed 30% cut in the nephrops total allowable catch (TAC) for area 7. Prior to the Council meeting, considerable effort was expended by me and my fellow Fisheries Ministers in Britain and the South of Ireland to combat the arguments that the Commission used to justify that proposal. Our efforts took the form of written submissions to and meetings with the Commission to argue that the latest scientific evidence supported our view that Irish Sea stocks were being fished sustainably. The Assembly, other political representatives and the entire local fishing industry fully supported me in the approach that I took and in my lobbying of the Commissioner and his officials.

During the meeting, the first compromise put forward by the presidency was to reduce the proposed cut to 20%. I argued that that was not justified, and I told the Commission of the serious consequences that would have for our local fishing industry. After lengthy negotiations, the Commission reduced the cut to 9%, but despite further strong representations no further movement was possible.

I assure Members that the ministerial team in Brussels fought right to the end to secure a better deal, and, at the final plenary session, the Commission was again pressed for further movement on nephrops in area 7, but it would not be moved. A number of further minor concessions on other issues ensured that there was sufficient support for the TAC and quota package from other member states to push the proposal through.

As I stated following the Council meeting, I was extremely disappointed with the outcome on nephrops, and I find the annual round of haggling over fish quotas

completely unsatisfactory. I am convinced that we must move to a different system that gives local fisheries managers and the industry a greater say in the fishing and conservation of the fish stocks off our coast.

The stocks of nephrops are stable, and the science supports that view. The only thing that has changed over the past year is the view of ICES that a different harvest ratio should be used, which in turn led the Commission to conclude that a lower TAC is needed. However, ICES also acknowledged that further scientific work is necessary to justify the basis for the harvest ratio used.

The best way forward would be to put in place a long-term fisheries management plan, and I want that to be developed as a priority during 2010. The Department and our colleagues in the South of Ireland must take the initiative. In so doing, we must carry out the further work that is required to establish a harvest ratio that represents an appropriate level of fishing and one that is consistent with a management objective of maximising the sustainable yield of nephrops. We must also consider whether the interests of the local fleet would be better served by the nephrops quota being set on an individual stock basis — such as the Irish Sea — rather than the present method, which sets a quota for the whole of area 7 and includes other stocks in addition to those in the Irish Sea.

During the negotiations, I also pressed for an increase in the Irish Sea herring quota, and we again provided strong scientific evidence to support our case. However, the Commission was unsympathetic, and the final package did not provide any increase. The Department has, however, developed a draft management plan for Irish Sea herring that will be submitted to the Commission. I hope that the plan can be refined and adopted as the basis of determining future fishing opportunities for that stock.

On other Irish Sea stocks, there was an expected 25% cut in the cod TAC in line with the cod recovery plan, no change for haddock and a 14% increase for Irish Sea plaice, which demonstrates that this stock maintains a healthy condition. Both sole and whiting stocks remained depleted, and each experienced a cut of 25%, but those stocks are of little importance to the local fleet, and the quotas remain above recorded landings.

The cod recovery plan also triggered a 25% reduction in fishing effort, which is measured in kilowatt days, and, although we were able to manage that cut last year, the situation is now becoming extremely tight. My Department has already had a meeting with the industry on developing effort allocations, and the challenge that we face collectively is to devise an approach that provides an equitable means of distributing days at sea across the fleet. That will ensure that vessels are able to fish

the quotas available to them, whether in the Irish Sea, the North Sea or west of Scotland waters.

We will, of course, use all the flexibility that is available in the cod recovery plan to buy back effort in return for conservation measures that reduce cod mortality. As part of that, I am pleased to inform Members that my Department has made £350,000 available from the European Fisheries Fund to enable the fleet to modify its nets, to improve selectivity and reduce discards of juvenile fish. Both our producer organisations are involved in the co-ordination and delivery of that initiative. We have agreed to establish a joint official and industry group, which will meet regularly to manage the effort control arrangement during the coming year.

In my discussions with Tony Killeen TD during the Council meeting, I pressed him on the importance of getting a quick resolution on the issue of post-Council swaps on cod. The Southern authorities will discuss that matter with their industry soon. We also agreed to co-operate with the banking of some of the South's unfished nephrops quota for 2009. Under the rules, member states can bank 10% of the quota from one year to another. The South has more than 10% left. We have agreed that some of the excess will be transferred to the North now and that that will be shared between us next year. The amount in question will depend on the headroom that we have within the 10% ceiling. That will be resolved during coming weeks.

I appreciate the opportunity to bring Members up to date on the outcome of the autumn fisheries negotiations as far as they affect our fleet. I am grateful to my colleagues Huw Irranca-Davies from DEFRA, Richard Lochhead from Scotland, and Tony Killeen from the South for their strong support for the nephrops case. I am also grateful for the support given by the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, Members of the House and local MEPs. I regret that the circumstances did not allow me to bring a more positive report to the Assembly.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Elliott): I apologise on behalf of the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, who could not make it to the Chamber in time for the debate. I beg the House's indulgence to allow me to put before it some brief comments on the outcome of the December Fisheries Council's decision. The Minister's statement is bleak news indeed for our embattled fishing industry. No matter how anybody tries to disguise that, it cannot be dressed up as good news just because the reduction is less than that which was proposed originally.

In 2010, management of the prawn quota will be problematic. The bigger issue will be the management of days at sea. Behind the devastating prawn quota

headline, the promised cut of 25% in the number of days at sea that will become effective from 1 February 2010 will bite into the fleet and will, undoubtedly, mean that long-established traditional family businesses face the prospect of financial ruin. People who are involved in processing the catch will be made redundant; and we will have the possible break-up and dispersal of the proud communities that have been traditionally supported by the industry, because it is no longer sustainable or viable for them to remain. Those are the hard economic facts of the situation.

At that Council meeting, the Spanish faced a proposal to cut one of their most important quotas — hake — by 10%. The result was to find an increase of 7%. At the same meeting, the French faced a proposal to cut one of their most important quotas — Celtic Sea cod — by 25%. The result was the maintenance of the status quo. Indeed, for Scotland, the Council agreed to a rollover of the quota for the North Sea prawn industry, which affects part of Scotland's most valuable fleet, as well as a 10% increase in the megrim quota and a rollover in the monkfish quota, which are two of the highest-value species. Furthermore, flexibility in the monkfish quota will allow west coast fishermen to catch an additional 460 tons.

When the Scottish, Spanish and French were able to secure such remarkable results, where did Northern Ireland go wrong with the prawn quota? How can one UK region — Scotland — secure such a positive outcome while another — Northern Ireland — which is represented by the same people, face such devastation? Will the Minister confirm that that is another example of her allowing the industry to be done over by the European Union?

10.45 am

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Although I welcome the question, I do not believe for a minute that I dressed that up as good news. In opening and closing my statement, I said that I was disappointed with the outcome and that I had hoped for a better result for the industry. Notwithstanding that, we argued strongly and were able to bring the reduction down from over 30%.

The Member makes the point that the Spanish and French got everything that they wanted, but that is not the case. He is not comparing like with like. The Spanish and French achieved some wins for some stocks, but they were disappointed in other areas. Although the Spanish made a great deal about arrangements for mackerel, they did not get everything that they wanted on other stocks. As I have said in the House before, this was a negotiation, and the nature of negotiations is that one does not always get what one wants.

The final case for nephrops was pushed as hard as possible — right into the final plenary session. No one

in the Commission or in the presidency is in any doubt about the importance of the fishing industry, not only for our economy but from a cultural and societal point of view, and I have made that clear throughout my time as Minister. The Commission was heavily influenced by the ICES advice on harvest ratios. Members should not forget that it initially suggested cuts of 30%.

The poor state of the stock on the Porcupine Bank was also a factor, and that made some cut almost inevitable. However, we went in fighting very hard. Although we did not accept going into the negotiations on the Porcupine Bank stocks, we went in fighting for a rollover to continue to work right up to the end. In the circumstances, we achieved the best result that we could on nephrops.

The 25% cut in fishing effort is a direct consequence of the cod recovery plan, the introduction of which I opposed strenuously. We have been able to ensure that the fleet had sufficient days to catch the available quota in the interim. My officials have already begun discussions with the industry on how best to calculate and manage fishing effort this year, and a joint industry/official group has been set up to do that. We are exploring how to improve the case to exempt certain vessels and the scope to adopt measures to reduce cod mortality, which would allow extra days to be made available.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement and for her efforts. I also thank her officials, advisers, the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee and MEPs. I am sounding a bit like Barry McGuigan.

Mr Kennedy: At least he used to win.

Mr W Clarke: I think that he was knocked out in the end.

I agree with the Minister: haggling over quotas at the mouth of Christmas is not helpful to our fishing industry or anyone's fishing industry. Local fisheries have to be managed by local managers, and I look forward to that being done in the future.

With regard to the Spanish and the French — I am sorry, a Cheann Comhairle, for stepping outside the remit slightly — they are sovereign states. If Tom Elliott wants to come in a united front on an all-Ireland basis, we would have greater bargaining power.

Will the Minister be considering the case for decommissioning?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I welcome the question. I noted Mr Kennedy's point. Barry McGuigan did not win all the time, and, if Mr Kennedy wants to step outside, I will show him how well I can box.

Mr Kennedy: I am not normally subject to such kind offers.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: We had a very robust negotiation. When sitting opposite the Commission and looking into the white of their eyes, I saw that they were in no doubt about the importance that I placed on the industry. I made the point that in November the Assembly was united on the debate about what we needed for the industry, and that was a strong message to take. However, it would be strengthened by Mr Clarke's suggestion.

Decommissioning is a subject that generates strong debate. It is an attractive proposition for those wishing to leave the industry, and it helps to reduce overcapacity within certain segments of the fleet. On the other hand, the needs of processors and the support sectors must also be considered. Decommissioning results in reduced availability of local raw material and impacts on the sustainability of the support services network that is required to keep our fleet operational. We have commissioned an update of the fleet futures model, and we will use a methodology that links together the total allowable catch, fishing effort, costs, fish prices and the acceptable normal average profit for each vessel in different sectors of the fleet under several scenarios.

That report is being finalised, and the Fisheries Forum will consider it at its next three meetings, which are scheduled for the coming months. The Fisheries Forum will then make recommendations to me. Whatever those recommendations may be, a robust, sector-wide business case will be required to justify the investment of public money under such a scheme. I look forward to receiving the forum's recommendations in order that progress can be made in that critical area.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. She said that a long-term fisheries management plan is a necessity. How does the Minister rate the initiative? Is it just another piece of window dressing? How much priority has her Department given to that initiative, and how quickly will we see the management plan take effect on an all-island basis?

I also welcome what she said about how the technical conservation regulation will now be taken forward. I am glad to see that her party now sees merit in the outcome of the Lisbon Treaty. Maidir le pointe a haon, ba mhaith liom a fháil amach an Gaeilge nó Ulster Scots a bhí ann sin.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I do not know whether the Member was listening: I did not give any support to the Lisbon Treaty. I did say that, now that the treaty has been ratified, the making of fisheries legislation will require a co-decision of the European Parliament and the European Commission.

The Member asked about the management plan. As I said, I do not believe that the current arrangements are acceptable. It is not only an unsatisfactory way for me to do business as Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, it is not a good way for businesses, fishermen and processors who are planning their year's work to do business. It is very difficult to have a long-term vision for one's business — to look three, five or 10 years down the line — when one does not know what is coming. A working group has therefore been set up to consider the management plan. We need to find an alternative, because the current method is not a satisfactory way in which to do business and is not a good way in which to ensure my ultimate objective of ensuring our local fishing industry's sustainability and profitability.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her statement to the Assembly, and I congratulate her and her colleagues on the effort that they made to secure better facilities for our fishing industry. At least we had a local voice present. I remember that, not so long ago, we were represented by a cross-channel Minister who did not even turn up to Fisheries Council meetings. Members will also remember that.

The Minister stated:

"the technical conservation regulation is now in the hands of the Spanish presidency ... Therefore, there will be an opportunity for our MEPs to influence that policy and future fisheries legislation."

Mr Speaker: I advise the Member to come to his question.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister inform the House whether our MEPs are working, have been working and will continue to work jointly, with combined voice and effort, on behalf of the Northern Ireland fishing fleet so that that voice will be heard? Can the Minister exert any influence to ensure that that happens?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I thank the Member for his question. I know, Cheann Comhairle, that you were hurrying him along, but I was quite enjoying his contribution. The serious point is that the MEPs now have more of a role to play on the issue. I have had some useful meetings with the MEPs jointly. They have a good working relationship with the Department, and arrangements are in place whereby, when necessary, briefings are given and meetings arranged throughout the year. To have the three MEPs make joint representations to the Commission would certainly help to bolster our case, and I look forward to their doing that throughout the coming year.

Mr Shannon: It is important that we thank the Minister for the efforts that she made in Brussels and the amount of energy that she expended, with the support of our MEPs. What frustrates me — Mr Elliott made this point earlier — is that, despite the energetic

efforts that were made at December's Fisheries Council meeting, we did not get all that far ahead. The Minister said that the proposed cut in the nephrops total allowable catch of 20% was reduced to 9%, so progress was certainly made, but there is frustration that —

Mr Speaker: The Member must come to his question.

Mr Shannon: Last Saturday, I met some fishermen in Portavogie, among whom there is much dismay and concern. Scotland has already paid out three rafts of EFF money, and I understand that we have not paid out any. When will the money be paid out so that some finance can be paid directly to the fishing industry at Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel?

Will the Minister provide some idea on the issue of leasing and swapping? In Portavogie last Saturday, concern was expressed that no leases or swaps would be available, so confirmation is needed on that. Mr Speaker, I appreciate the fact that you have been lenient and gracious. Spain, France, Germany and other countries seem to have done not too badly out of that. What can we do that those countries have already done?

Paragraph 14 of the Minister's statement —

Mr Speaker: Bring your questions to a close.

Mr Shannon: I am definitely coming to the end now. I am sorry; I could be here for 20 minutes, but I know that you would not let me.

The Minister referred to a joint official and industry group. Will the Minister indicate who will be on that joint group, and will it involve all the local industry? If the fishing industry is to survive, that group must be up and running. I thank the Speaker for his patience.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I thank the Member for his comprehensive questions; I will try to cover as many of his points as I can. I do not have the details of the group's membership with me, but, obviously, it will involve producers' organisations and processors because they are an important part of the industry.

EFF money is now coming on-stream, which will mean some €36.2 million of further public investment in the fishing industry over the next five years. There has been a delay in getting EFF payments started in the North as a result of having to complete measure-level business cases on our proposals for investment. However, four key measures are now open, and I hope that two further measures will open early in 2010, with axis 1 coming on culmination of the work of the Fisheries Forum.

To date, we have received 28 applications seeking approximately £3.5 million of EFF grants, and those applications are being evaluated. Two selection panels were convened before Christmas to consider the applications that have been received to date. I am pleased

to say that initial interest has been brisk, and my officials are in the process of making a letter of offer to 12 successful projects, which represents an investment of £1.1 million.

I want to ensure that we use the resources at our disposal wisely to allow the industry to be more profitable and more sustainable and to be capable of making a strong contribution to the economies of the coastal communities in which it is based. At a time when there is significant pressure on resources, EFF funds are best used to deal with the longer-term issues that are facing the sector rather than for short-term financial assistance.

Swaps were carried out with the Southern industry towards the second half of 2009, and I hope that something can be done earlier this year. I will not make any promises now, but we have had discussions with the Southern Minister and the Southern industry. I am hopeful that something can be achieved on swaps.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement, and I thank her and her officials for their efforts in the negotiations. How will the results of the negotiations in 2009 help us to prepare for the negotiations that will undoubtedly happen in 2010? Will the Minister elaborate on the potential for that, to which paragraph 15 refers?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As I said in my statement, the key issue in determining the nephrops total allowable catch is the setting-up of an appropriate harvest ratio. That is where differences of scientific opinion emerged during the year. My officials in AFBI are already working on how best to ensure that an appropriate harvest ratio is developed and accepted by ICES. I have also asked my officials to work with the industry and scientists in drawing up long-term management plans for the main fisheries on which the industry depends.

11.00 am

Again I pay tribute to the AFBI scientists for their efforts on a collaborative project with the Marine Institute in Galway, because we rushed that work through in order to have a sound scientific basis for our negotiations. The Commission accepted that evidence in part, because it reduced the cut to 9%, but we are already working on ways to improve that figure for next year.

As my statement outlined, member states can bank 10% of their quotas. Therefore, if we have unused quota this year, we could bank the extra percentage to fish it next year in the hope that circumstances will be better. We fish our quota, and we have no room for manoeuvre. However, the South has excess quota, and if we work with the Southern authorities, we can ensure that some of that 10% will be made available to our fleet, thereby reducing the 9% cut to, perhaps, 7% or

6% in real terms. From that point of view, we worked well with the South. We are very grateful to the Southern authorities, and we want to expand on that work to ensure that we maximise the opportunities available to our County Down fishing fleet.

Mr McCallister: I am relieved that my contribution is not time-limited today, because I wish to make a brief statement. *[Laughter.]* I thank the Minister for her statement and congratulate her on going with the sovereign state and working as part of a British ministerial team.

I wish to make two points. First, although the Minister was disappointed with the outcome for prawn fishing, will she assure the House that she will start the process early to try to get a better deal next year and that she will fight robustly to get a better deal for our fishermen across Northern Ireland, particularly as fishing, as she will know, is of huge interest in my constituency?

Secondly, how does the Minister hope to change the system, and what support does she have for moving away from the “round of haggling”, as she described it, of the December Fisheries Council? How does she hope to move to a newer system of managing fishing, and what support does she have for that from other Administrations in the UK and in wider Europe?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I thank the Member for his question. We want to put a great deal of effort into the management plans this year. If we can devise a management plan that the EU Commission will accept, there will be less need for haggling in December every year, and we can have more stability, which the industry would welcome.

Obviously, we do not leave our efforts on fisheries until December: work is ongoing throughout the year. A new Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries will be taking up her post, and I look forward to meeting her as soon as possible to put again our points, to illustrate the size of our fishing industry and its significance, and to demonstrate that we pose no threat to the conservation of stocks in European waters. We want to fish in a way that is sustainable and will protect stock but that will contribute to the conservation of our fishing villages. To that end, I hope that the new commissioner will visit at some stage, and I will impress on her the need to do so.

This work has been ongoing throughout my tenure as Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, and it will continue. We have held meetings throughout the year to warm up the Commission to the need to minimise our cuts or to maximise our increases. As I said, we argued for an increase in our herring quota. We were unable to get that, although we had a good scientific basis for it. We want to continue to do that work. We achieved an increase in the haddock quota two years ago, and the rollover that there has been with that since then has been very useful. Although nephrops are our

most important stock by far, other stocks contribute to the sustainability of our fishing fleet, and we want to maximise our opportunities right across the board.

Mr Burns: I thank the Minister for her statement. As a Member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I have heard regular presentations from fishermen. The fishing industry always seems to be on the brink of financial ruin.

Those continual cuts make it more difficult for the fishing fleet to survive. Although we did well to get a 9% reduction this year, if that is followed by a 9% reduction in 2010 and another in 2011, when will the fishing fleet become unviable? What efforts will the Minister make to ensure that the fishing fleet survives?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: A 9% cut next year is inconceivable at this stage, but the Commission could suggest a 30%, 40% or 50% cut. We do not know what next year will bring. However, we will continue to make our case. I heard the same statements from producer organisations and from fishermen and processors in County Down. We made the point to the Commission that we are fast moving towards that line in the sand when the industry will be no longer viable or the infrastructure will not be there to support it.

We have made that case very strongly and will continue to press it. We will also continue to hope to have the support of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development in helping us to make that case. A unified voice from this House does resonate in Europe, and the more that we can prove that we are working together and are on the same page on this issue, the more helpful that will be. We will make every effort to minimise the cuts by trying to achieve a rollover next year. We will also be working with the industry to decide on our list, our top priorities, and what we will be robustly fighting for in December 2010.

Mr McNarry: The mind boggles at the creativity of the Benches opposite when they tried to put nationalities on prawns and fish. I could not believe that, when we all know that red, white and blue tastes an awful lot better than green, white and gold in any species.

The Minister knows that the negotiations are an annual event. What did she learn from the negotiations that will help to formulate the arguments next time around? What new and innovative assistance can her Department offer to the prawn industry in Portavogie?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Obviously, I do not work on behalf of just Portavogie; Kilkeel and Ardglass are also fishing ports. This has been my third year at the Fisheries Council, and we have deployed every tool at our disposal to try to ensure the sustainability of our fishing fleet.

The two things that are important this year are the management plan, which we can work on with the industry to put to the Commission, and the scientific evidence, so that we can ensure that the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea does not have a different opinion on harvest ratios. My officials worked very hard throughout last year in the lead up to the negotiations. That work has already started this year: we do not wait. As soon as one set of negotiations is over, we are looking to the next. Those are the key pieces of work that will best help us to minimise the cuts.

There is a very strong environmental lobby in Europe. We have seen robust red lines drawn around cod stocks. From a conservation point of view, stocks in European waters are not as sound as those in other parts of the globe. There is strong support in Europe to ensure the sustainability of those stocks, so we have to find a compromise. Therefore, we will work with officials, the industry and scientists to try to ensure that 2010 has an outcome about which we can all be pleased.

Mr P J Bradley: Each year after the December talks, we seem to get a report on how well the other member states have done. We always seem to be bringing up the rear with little or no results. Nevertheless, I thank the Minister for her statement. I know that those talks are difficult.

The question being asked in the harbours and processing factories is why Northern Ireland has fared so badly, particularly in recent years. I suggest that it is because all year round the negotiators, Sinn Féin and the DUP in particular, are so anti-Europe that they have no chance over there. If one goes and tells Santa Claus that one does not believe in him, one cannot expect presents from him.

A Member: Did he come to you, P J?

Mr P J Bradley: He came to me twice.

Where was I? I got distracted there. Back in October when there was talk about 30%, I warned the House that that was only a negotiating figure. It was never going to be 30%. The processors were concerned that if the figure exceeded 5%, they would be in deep trouble. Has the Minister visited the processors since the December talks, and what assessment has she made as to how the 9% cut will affect them?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The 9% cut will affect everybody, and I do not for one minute accept Mr Bradley's now-legendary negativity in his allegation that we fared badly and have done so in recent years. Nobody in the Commission — neither the commissioners nor their officials — would deny that we have put a huge effort into building relations with Europe to ensure that we get a better deal, not just for our fishermen but for our farmers. The Member's points are petty politicking in the run-up to an election, and they are starting to be a bit tiresome.

I assure the Member that, like Barry McElduff, I have been snowed in since I returned from the December talks. We have a lot of work to do, but hightailing it to visit a processor at Christmastime would only have been paying lip service. I will continue to work with the processing and catching sectors, and I am sure that Mr Bradley will continue to be his negative self.

Draft Expenditure Plans for 2010-11

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on the draft expenditure plans for 2010-11.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): Mr Speaker, with your permission, I wish to make a statement regarding the Executive's proposals in respect of the review of the 2010-11 spending plans for Northern Ireland Departments, which is being published today for consultation with the Assembly.

In light of the changes in the economic situation and the emerging position for 2010-11, I initiated this review in the summer of 2009, with the aim of ensuring that public finances remain on a secure basis as we move into the next financial year. Work on the review has progressed over recent months, and it examined the best way forward through a series of discussions at the Executive. I also held separate bilateral meetings with each of my ministerial colleagues. That has culminated in the proposals that I set out today, which were agreed by the Executive when they last met on 17 December 2009.

However, before I explain the Executive's proposals, I will set out the public expenditure context. In January 2008, the Executive and the Assembly approved the spending plans for Northern Ireland Departments for the three years from 2008-09 through to 2010-11. That included record levels of investment in our public services and, in particular, investment in capital projects such as roads, schools, hospitals and housing. In addition, following the significant increase under direct rule Ministers, the level of domestic regional rates was frozen in cash terms over three years, with non-domestic rates restricted to the projected level of inflation at that time. That Budget outcome reflected the importance of developing our economy as the top priority in the Executive's Programme for Government in order to take full advantage of the boost to local business from the transition to a more peaceful society.

However, since the three-year spending plans were agreed, there have been a number of changes in economic conditions, with first the rise in energy costs and then the economic recession having a serious impact on the local economy, particularly in terms of unemployment. Although there is increasing evidence of recovery, the legacy of damage to UK public finances will have implications for the Executive for many years to come.

In the short term, there has already been an impact in respect of the shortfall in capital receipts that had formed a significant part of the available funding for the capital investment programme. At the same time, the Executive have taken a proactive approach in responding to the economic downturn, including the

acceleration of capital investment and the deferral of domestic water charges. In my Department, the decision to freeze non-domestic rates in cash rather than real terms for 2009-10, and the introduction of a small business rates relief scheme, will also provide significant support to local businesses.

11.15 am

I now turn to the public expenditure position for 2010-11. All those measures have implications for the funding that is available to the Executive. Although it has been possible to address many of those pressures as part of the in-year monitoring process, I decided last summer that the scale of the issues for 2010-11 was simply too large and that pro-active action was required at an early stage.

A large number of issues are involved, including the implications of decisions that were taken at a national level and previous commitments that the Executive made, and they are set out in detail in the consultation document. However, I wish to touch on the most significant issues, which are the costs of further deferral of water and sewerage charges for domestic customers, the need to reduce the level of overcommitment and, of course, the costs of the Civil Service equal pay claim.

I will begin with water charges. One of the Executive's first decisions was to reverse the plans of direct rule Ministers to introduce domestic water charges in full from April 2007. In November 2008, that was extended to the current financial year, following the agreement secured with the Treasury that the significant amount of non-cash costs involved would not fall to the Executive for 2008-09 and 2009-2010.

Following the previous deferrals, domestic charges will also not be introduced in 2010-11. That will provide an additional saving of approximately £400 next year for the average household that uses those public services, when compared with the situation under direct rule. Although changes in budgeting treatment mean that the cost to the Executive of that measure is less than it could have been, there remains a significant pressure of £120 million for current expenditure and £93 million for capital investment.

Although the Executive were able to cover the cost of deferring water charges in 2009-2010 as a result of the June monitoring round, the experience of 2008-09 and this year to date is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to source sufficient resources to address emerging pressures while, at the same time, reducing the level of overcommitment to a prudent level.

As part of the original 2007 Budget process, the planned level of overcommitment had already been reduced to £60 million for 2010-11, compared with £100 million in 2008-09. However, the further decline in the level of reduced requirements that Departments declared in the first half of 2009-2010, as set out in my

December monitoring statement yesterday, means that there is a need to go further. In response, the Executive have proposed that the starting level of current expenditure overcommitment should be reduced to zero next year, which will provide much greater scope to address emerging pressures.

In addition, although the main focus of the review has been on the pressures faced in 2010-11, it is important that we begin to prepare for the future, when resources are expected to be even more constrained. It is for that reason that the Executive have proposed that £26 million be allocated to an invest to save fund, which will provide additional support to Departments for the upfront costs that are often required in order to make savings. Proposals for invest to save projects have been commissioned from Departments, and I will provide the Assembly with further details on specific allocations as part of the finalisation of those draft plans.

The easy option would have been to do nothing on the issue, which would have reduced the level of intervention required at this time. However, that short-sighted approach would have shifted the burden to the 2010-11 financial year, during which the Executive would have struggled to address emerging pressures.

The third significant pressure facing the Executive next year is the one-off cost of the Civil Service equal pay claim. Although the overall cost of just over £160 million will be offset by the support that my predecessor secured from the Prime Minister in 2008, it will still involve the ongoing costs of additional reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing. That means that there remains an unfunded pressure of up to around £65 million for 2010-11, depending on the timing of the payments.

Overall, my assessment is that the Executive face spending pressures next year of £217.1 million in current spending and £149.9 million in capital investment. Including the £26 million set aside for the invest to save fund, those figures are equivalent to 2.6% of planned current expenditure for 2010-11 and 10.2% of capital investment.

In response to the emerging financial position, the Executive have considered a range of alternatives. However, the only realistic option that would generate the level of funding that is required would be to make adjustments to the existing spending plans of Departments. Although it was recognised that all Departments could go further in improving efficiency, the Executive agreed that some Departments would be in a better position than others to release additional resources next year and that, therefore, a targeted approach should be adopted, rather than a simple pro rata cut.

In addition, the Executive were critically aware of the need to protect priority front line services where

possible, with, for example, the lowest percentage level of savings being proposed for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Unfortunately, the overall level of savings required meant that it was simply not possible to exempt an entire Department from the process. However, I expect my ministerial colleagues to seek to reduce the costs of bureaucracy in the first instance.

Inevitably, there will be calls for the savings required of one Department or another to be reduced because of the impact that they will have on public services. That is always the case. However, the reality is that reducing the amount required of one Department increases the burden on others. As I have said to the Assembly on more than one occasion, I am more than happy to give a lesson on the concept that is the basis of all economics — opportunity cost — so that we understand that there is no point in demanding more money for something if we are not prepared to say where that money will come from. Therefore, although I and my Executive colleagues welcome any proposals from fellow Members in response to the draft plans that are being published today, those proposals must include details of where additional savings could be made and of where they should be lower. Addressing both sides of the equation is essential if alternative proposals are to be considered credible. The Executive will also continue to examine areas in which savings could be made on a cross-departmental basis to minimise the impact on public services.

There will be a more general concern that the overall level of public spending is lower than that which was originally set out in January 2008. However, it is important to note that most of the savings that are required will be recycled back into Departments. In addition, although reducing the level of overcommitment requires £60 million in additional savings now, that in turn means that there will be much greater scope to address pressures as part of the 2010-11 in-year monitoring process. The issue is partly one of timing.

Overall, the consultation document shows that the total level of spending by Northern Ireland Departments would only change marginally under the Executive's proposals when compared with the original plans. There will be a reduction of 0.1% in current expenditure to £9 billion, and the capital investment plans will decrease by 1% to £1.4 billion. That is less than the rates of end-year underspend that have been experienced in recent years and highlights that the objective of the review was to reprioritise the funding available to the Executive in light of changing circumstances, local needs and priorities.

One area that was considered as part of the review, but where the Executive have decided that action should be taken as part of the 2010-11 in-year monitoring process, was the anticipated shortfall in departmental

capital receipts. Although the economic recession has had a wide-ranging impact on Northern Ireland, the main consequence for public finances has been that the planned level of departmental capital receipts has not been achieved in full. In 2010-11, the main shortfall will be the £200 million that was planned from the sale of the Crossnacreevy site. There will be further amounts from house and land sales as well as planned disposals by other Departments. However, there is expected to be a similar amount of funding available to the Executive from slippage in two major capital investment projects, which will allow the Executive to provide support to the Department affected, provided that all available actions are also taken by those Departments to address the funding deficit internally.

In addition, although there are signs of recovery in the property market, the position remains volatile. In that context, it would have been inappropriate to address the pressures at this time, because market conditions may be significantly different in six months, and Departments should be provided with the opportunity to address the shortfalls internally in advance of calling on the Executive for assistance.

I will now outline the next steps in the process. It is essential that the proposals set out today are subject to robust scrutiny and challenge in the Assembly over the coming weeks. The document that I have published today sets out details of the public context for 2010-11 and the Executive's proposed response. In addition, I have asked my Executive colleagues to publish details of the implications for their individual Departments on their departmental websites. That is to include details of how the additional savings are to be made, as well as the improvements in public services that will still be delivered next year.

I expect that all Committees will wish to review the position for their respective Departments, particularly on how the savings are to be achieved. The Committee for Finance and Personnel will have a key role in that by co-ordinating the views of Committees as well as considering the overall strategic approach to the exercise.

It is unfortunate that more time was not available to the Assembly as part of the consultation process. However, I hope that Members recognise that the complex and difficult issues involved required careful consideration by the Executive in the development of the draft, sorry the draft, proposals that are before the House today. That was a Freudian slip. *[Interruption.]* I am sure that when we get to the consultation stage, we will have some response on that.

In addition, it is essential that the revised departmental budgets are confirmed before the start of the new financial year. It would have been even better if the review had already been completed, as I had originally planned. Therefore, I have asked that the Committee

for Finance and Personnel publishes its response to the Executive's draft proposals by the end of February in order to provide the Executive with sufficient time to consider the views of the Assembly in coming to an agreed final set of spending plans for 2010-11 by the middle of March.

In conclusion, the downturn and instability in both the property and financial markets over the past two years has had a significant impact on the global economy.

11.30 am

Although we all want a swift recovery, there will be repercussions for many years to come, particularly for public finances. The most optimistic scenario for the next spending review is an unprecedented real-terms freeze in current spending and a reduction in capital funding, coupled with increases in taxation as the Government seek to reduce the level of borrowing. Therefore, the proposals that I have published today represent an early indication that even more difficult decisions must be taken in the years ahead.

In particular, the review highlighted the clear trade-off between the continued deferral of water charges and the amount of funding that is available for public services. However, given the circumstances that I faced, I am confident that the proposals represent the best way forward for the next financial year. The proposals recognise the constraints on the Executive and seek to restore public finances to a more sustainable position while, at the same time, providing more assistance to households through the further deferral of the introduction of water charges. I commend the proposals and the report to the House.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Given that the Department previously placed considerable store by the in-year monitoring process as a tool for managing budgetary pressures, does the need for the revision of the 2010-11 Budget highlight the limitations of the monitoring rounds and the urgent need to re-establish a formal process for reviewing and agreeing the Executive's Budget to provide sufficient time for Assembly scrutiny? Moreover, will the Minister clarify what, if any, additional efficiency savings over and above the current level of 3% will be required in 2010-11 should the British Chancellor announce additional measures for Whitehall Departments?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Chairman is right; we have relied on in-year monitoring four times a year to reallocate money that Departments thought that they would spend but, ultimately, did not spend. However, for the next year, if we reduce the level of overcommitment to zero, we will offer more opportunity for in-year monitoring because we will not have to keep our eye on the fact that we have already

put in place spending plans that encompass more money than was available. In the past number of years, we found that we could not rely on the fact that, towards the end of the year, Departments would not have spent all that money. Therefore, on the basis of experience, we recognised that it was neither realistic nor feasible to continue with overcommitment. However, as I said in the statement, it will enable us to rely to some extent on the in-year monitoring process.

We have to live with in-year monitoring for the next year. However, as I said yesterday, every approach is problematic because the whole point of in-year monitoring and asking Departments to surrender money was to deal with unforeseen circumstances and inescapable bids that arose because of unpredictable events. We could do that through a contingency fund, in-year monitoring or simply by coming to the Executive as events arise and telling every Department that it must divvy up. All those options have their own difficulties.

As I said yesterday, I am open to the idea of a discussion in the Committee or the Assembly about how we deal with pressures that arise that we cannot possibly anticipate. I am happy to consider the options, but we will find difficulties with each of them. If Members decide that in-year monitoring is not the best option and there is a forcible case to support that assertion, the Department will be prepared to consider that.

We have additional efficiency savings to make next year, and they are encompassed in the Budget proposals. Although my Department is not responsible for each Department's efficiency targets, it monitors them. We met the targets for 2008-09 and we are on target for 2009-2010. All the indications are that we will meet the efficiency targets for 2010-11.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement and I particularly welcome the Executive's proposals on invest to save. As with any Budget, the key test for a lot of people will be its effect on individual households, particularly in these harsh economic times. Will the Minister clarify the position for households in 2010-11 with regard to the regional rate? Furthermore, what is the overall financial impact on households under this Budget compared with what might have been the case had we followed the advice of some people outside the Assembly and actually been under direct rule?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The impact on households is determined mainly by the fact that we decided to freeze the regional rate again for another year. Under direct rule there were increases, on average, of approximately 7% a year. Had the increase been 7% this year, the regional rate alone would have taken £21 million from households. The further deferral of water charges for this year represents an average saving of £400 per household.

I know that there have been some criticisms of the draft expenditure proposals. I am sure that, during this discussion, some Members will ask whether I should have done certain things. However, there is a balance between the amount of money that we spend on public services and the amount that we take out of people's pockets at a time of increased unemployment and fewer opportunities for people to do overtime at work or to do part-time work. People are feeling the economic pinch, and households are facing increasing bills. However, households are better off by not having to pay water charges or the kind of rate increases that they would have faced under direct rule. The Executive made that judgement, and households across Northern Ireland will benefit as a result.

Mr McNarry: I sense the Minister's continued realisation of how tight he is being squeezed. He has outlined very serious and hard-hitting choices. First, is he satisfied that his statement will represent the sum of spending cuts in the Executive in this comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, and is he ruling out further cuts in the next financial year? How frank can he be today?

Secondly, does he believe that his planned cuts will have an impact on front line services that affect vulnerable people? Is he convinced that his Department has explored all the options that are available to him before he goes further in requesting from his fellow Ministers the drastic action that he has said is necessary?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Perhaps my problem is that, at times, I am too frank with people. I will be as frank as always in response to the Member's question.

Is this the sum total of the cuts that we are likely to face in 2010-11? The answer is that I do not know. The reason for that is not because the plans do not represent the full investigation that we have conducted into our current financial status, spending plans and the situations that the Executive know they will have to face. If that were the only part of the equation, I would be fairly confident that it represents the budgetary position that we will have to face over the next year.

However, an election is planned for the beginning of the next financial year. The Labour Party and the Conservative Party, one of which will set the picture for spending in the United Kingdom as a whole and, therefore, the amount of money made available to devolved Administrations, have indicated that they will have to administer some fairly robust and hard economic treatment. I do not believe that Northern Ireland will escape the consequences of that. I do not know how hard that is likely to be.

I spoke to my counterpart in the Welsh Assembly Government this morning to discuss our approach when we meet the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on

Thursday. We discussed the implications for budgets across the United Kingdom. She is in exactly the same position as we are. We must seek to press the Chief Secretary as to what the next CSR period is likely to bring, and what the implications are likely to be.

I assure Members that, based on the level of need in Northern Ireland, there is a strong case for arguing for additional resources and that the reduction in spending should not impact as heavily on Northern Ireland as it might in other parts. That is a case that we have to make, and one that I will make forcibly.

As far as the impact on front line services is concerned, the paper that I published today sets out the global figure for each Department. I have emphasised in my statement and in the paper that Ministers should first look at how they can effect those savings by reducing the level of bureaucracy, administration and so on in their Departments. However, it is up to individual Ministers to bring forward plans to show what they intend to do to effect those savings. Ministers will publish those plans on their respective departmental websites, and the plans will then go to Committees for scrutiny. I am sure that Committees will examine the choices that Ministers have made, question the Ministers about those choices and ensure that the choices that Ministers have made are the ones that impact least on front line services. That is a job of each individual scrutiny Committee.

To be frank with the Member, I am not saying that there will be no impact on front line services. However, when Ministers bring forward proposals for their Department that have an impact on front line services, Committees must ensure that there is not something else that could have been given a higher priority when it comes to savings, thereby avoiding such an impact. That is a role for all Members in the scrutiny of the Budget.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister for his statement. We are, of course, receiving a crisis mini-Budget. Will the Minister reflect on the fact that he and his predecessors received an increased budget in real terms over this three-year period? The actual outcome has been a series of cuts. Public discussion has focused on cuts; that is the reality.

Will the Minister reflect that the consultation is very much Committee-based? Committees will consider their individual departmental interest. Does the Minister agree that a more overarching review of the Budget is required? I was pleased to see Sinn Féin moving onto our ground in that regard.

Finally, will the Minister reconcile the figures that he has provided in his statement? When the two figures referred to in his statement as spending pressures are added together, the cuts total £367 million. The Minister stated that that is equivalent to 2.6% of planned current expenditure and 10.2% of capital investment. Those are

very swingeing cuts, particularly in capital investment. Later in the statement, the figures presented are very much reduced.

It is stated that current spending will reduce by 0.1% to £9 billion and that capital investment plans will decrease by 1%. I notice that those latter figures are not replicated in the main document. Although it is important that the public presentation of the plans is accurate, I do not see how those figures can be reconciled.

11.45 am

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member is a kind of prophet of doom in the Assembly. Even when I come forward with the most optimistic and pleasing of statements, he always finds something bad to say. Maybe he feels that that is his role as a public representative. I think that sometimes public representatives should use their role to try to bring a little light and joy as well as to delve into where difficulties may lie. However, if the Member wishes to be known as the one with a dark cloud hanging over his head all the time, that is up to him.

The first thing to say is that this is not a crisis Budget. Do not forget that I identified early on that there would be an issue over the next year. All the reasons for that are given in the statement: the changing economic conditions; the fact that we were not getting the capital receipts that we hoped to get; and the fact that there were additional demands as a result of the changing economic conditions. Therefore, we needed to ask ourselves whether the normal in-year monitoring would be capable of dealing with the situation. I came to the conclusion that it would not. Therefore, let us have a considered view and let us look more at how we can deal with it. That is exactly what the process is about. It is not about crisis management; in fact, it is the exact opposite of crisis management. It is considered management of a changing situation, and we must deal with that.

The Member also indicated that we should look at the matter in an overarching way. The Chairperson of the Committee made it clear that she believed that that was a job for her Committee. The process is very clear. Each Committee will look at what its Minister proposes for the reductions and send its report and assessment to the Committee for Finance and Personnel, which will then make an overall assessment of how the Budget pans out across all Departments. In that process, information is fed from the people who have expert knowledge of individual Departments up to the Committee that is responsible for looking at the Budget as a whole. The Committee for Finance and Personnel will then bring its report to the Assembly for a debate, and that will give Members the opportunity to look at the Budget in its entirety. The Member tries to make an issue of that, but I do not know what the issue is.

He also mentioned figures for the reduction in current spending and the reduction in capital spending, but I cannot remember those figures offhand because I did not write them down. He also questioned how those tie with the 0.1% reduction in current spending and the 1% reduction in capital spending in the overall Budget. The difference is that the £373 million of savings is a gross figure; those are the savings that we had to make. However, the figures for the overall Budget are the net figure. Do not forget that some of those savings were taken off. The savings were being made, but some were recycled in other ways and spent in Departments. Therefore, the difference is between the gross figures and the net figures. The figures of £9 billion in total for current spending and £1.4 billion in total for capital spending indicate what the final outcome will be.

The Member does his job, and he does it very well. However, I sometimes wish that he would not try to paint the blackest of pictures. If anything, Members should accept that the statement and the approach that we have taken are responses to things that I have heard the SDLP say in the past. It has stated that, in light of the current circumstances, we cannot simply plough on with what we had planned in 2008 because it was different from 2010. He is right, and that is exactly what we have done. At least give us some credit for that.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for his statement. I will take up the invitation from Peter Weir. The Minister talks about a choice between increasing revenue and spending cuts when, in fact, it should be a balance. I know of no other jurisdiction, certainly in Europe, if not further afield, in which governments do not have a balance of revenue and spending cuts. Indeed, that is the approach of all three of the main parties in Westminster. Does the Minister recognise, therefore, that the approach that he is taking will favour the people who are better off in this society? We have to bear in mind that the regional rate is not paid by everybody and that it is crudely related to the ability to pay. Water charges may also operate on that basis, with a potential affordability tariff. In contrast, it is those who depend disproportionately on public services who will be more affected.

Will the Minister also address the rationale for economic Departments bearing the larger burden of the spending cuts, particularly bearing in mind that we are trying to come out of a recession and trying to rebalance and modernise our economy?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: First, I will deal with the issue that the Member raised about whether we should have sought to deal with the situation by raising revenue rather than reducing the amount of spending —

Dr Farry: Both.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: So that I do not misrepresent the Member, his point was about giving more emphasis to the raising of revenue than to reductions. On the surface, that may appear to be an attractive proposition. However, the savings that we had to find amounted to £373 million. Raising the regional rate was an option. If it were raised by the level of inflation, that would have produced somewhere in the region of £9 million. Had we raised it by 10%, that would have produced £30 million. That would have still left a substantial hole in the Budget and it would have had a fairly dramatic impact on households at this time.

A commitment had been given to keep the regional rate frozen for three years, and that was made at a time when economic circumstances were even better for households than they are today. Many householders across Northern Ireland would have asked me to explain why I made a decision to help them when economic circumstances were a bit better than they are today, and now, when economic circumstances are really harsh, I decide to take money out of their pockets. The Member may feel that that is an easy case to make to the electorate; I did not believe that it was and neither did the Executive. It would not have helped in a major way to address the issue that we faced. It is an argument that we could have, but I have outlined the reason why we did not go down that route.

As far as the reductions in the budgets of the economic Departments are concerned, there was a reduction in the current expenditure of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). It should not be forgotten that those reductions were made after I held bilateral meetings with each of the Ministers and talked to them about where they believed that they could effect savings in their Departments. The current reductions in the two economic Departments, DETI and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), are 2.2% and 2.4% respectively. Therefore, they are not overly stringent. Capital reductions, based on where those Departments believed that capital could be spent in the future, were 7.2% and 8.2% respectively, which are below average reductions.

If the Member compares the average reductions with those that were made in the two Departments that are responsible for delivering economic development in Northern Ireland, he will find that the latter ones are lower.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he give an assurance that the Civil Service equal pay claim will be paid in the 2010-11 financial year?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Civil Service unions have finished consulting with their members, and they have agreed that the equal pay claim is acceptable. Work must now be done, and,

indeed, my officials have already started to meet each of the 13,000 people involved to discuss the proposals and to determine each person's entitlement. The money available from the Treasury had to be spent in this financial year, but we have been given flexibility to move it over to next year.

There are three imperatives to settling the claim, partly in this financial year and partly in 2010-11: the flexibility to spread settlements over an additional financial year; the expectation among those who are eligible for the payments to be made; and the fact that the money has been built into our spending plans for next year, and, therefore, we will have to move on it as quickly as possible.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Is the Minister committed to conducting an equality impact assessment (EQIA) on the proposals for the 2010-11 Budget, and what preparations have been put in place to take that EQIA forward? I heard what the Minister said about the level of need here, and the point of conducting an EQIA would not be to engage in a procedural exercise for its own sake but to identify changes that could be brought about specifically to assist those who are most in need.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Equality impact assessments will not entirely be my Department's responsibility. The global figures and information on how they will impact each Department have been made available to all Ministers, who will then publish how their respective Departments intend to effect those savings. When a Department has compiled its list of implications, it will be up to that Department to conduct an equality impact assessment on it.

It is impossible for my Department to conduct an equality impact assessment until I know the exact nature of each Department's savings. I know how much DHSSPS, DETI, and so forth, will have to save, but I do not know how the Ministers intend to achieve those savings. Indeed, Ministers clearly, and quite rightly, indicated to me that they did not want me to decide how the savings in their respective Departments should be made. They want to make those decisions themselves, and they will have ownership of them. Therefore, once Ministers have presented their proposals to their respective Committees, it will be up to them to conduct equality impact assessments on them. When we see the final shape of how the savings are to be made, a high-level equality impact assessment can be carried out, based on those hundreds of individual decisions. That is the proper way to do things, so, initially, I will have no role to play in the matter.

Mr Hilditch: The Minister referred to the substantial one-off cost of £360 million that is associated with the Civil Service pay claim. It is understood that the bulk

of that cost and ongoing additional payments will be made to Department for Social Development staff. Further to the Minister's reply to Mr McQuillan, will the ongoing cost of settling the equal pay claim be met totally by the centre, or will efficiencies be required from the Department for Social Development?

Further to that, will the Minister also confirm whether slippage in the Royal Exchange project is to be used to provide additional funding for new housing and maintenance programmes?

12.00 noon

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive took two decisions on the equal pay claim and its impact on each Department. Departments will face a one-off hit as a result of the legacy aspect of the equal pay claim. Some people will be due back payments for as many as six years, and the Executive took the position that it was unacceptable to expect Departments to meet those payments from their own budgets. Therefore, a central pot of money will be made available for the legacy element of the claim. However, Departments will have to meet the ongoing costs. I accept that some Departments will be hit harder than others. In fact, my Department will have nearly the same percentage hit on its budget as the Department for Social Development, because more AA and AO grades work in my Department than in some others. Therefore, there will be an unequal impact. However, almost every decision that is made when we make budgetary and economic changes has an unequal impact on Departments. Some changes, for example, might impact more on DOE and DRD than on the Department of Education.

We cannot say that every decision that has an unequal impact must be funded from some central pot. That central pot does not magically appear from somewhere — it means money being taken from other Departments. When a cost is ongoing, how long should that central pot be held to supply the money? If that is done on the basis of the unequal impact on Departments, how many factors should be included in that central pot? What does that do to the flexibility of Departments to change their ways, and what incentive does it provide for doing so?

If one Department suffers a major hit because of a particular issue, but a central pot guarantees that the money will be paid, there is no incentive for a Minister to find a different way of resolving the issue, such as considering whether the Department needs as many staff in certain grades. Therefore, if one Department is hit harder than another and the money is paid out from a central pot, that Department will continue to act in the same way for ever. That is not the best way forward, and, for that reason, the Executive decided that the Departments will have to fund the ongoing costs.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for his statement. He noted that there was a shortfall of £200 million in respect of capital receipts from Crossnacreevy. Who, if anyone, is responsible for making up that shortfall, and what role does the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development play in that?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his question. Indeed, he has just reminded me of the second part of the previous question, which was also about capital receipts and the money from the DSD's Royal Exchange project.

At approximately £20 million, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's capital budget is quite small. Therefore, the Member will recognise immediately that it is impossible to say that, should the capital receipt from Crossnacreevy not become available, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development should fund that from its own resources. That would not be feasible, as it does not have that much capital spend per annum. In fact, it would amount to its capital spend for 10 years. That is why I said in my statement that reduced requirements for other capital spend projects that will not happen next year could be used to offset the shortfall in receipts, such as those that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development had been expecting to receive from Crossnacreevy. The burden, therefore, would not have to fall on the Departments.

However, in saying that, I outlined two conditions. First, Departments would have to show that they had made every effort to make up all or part of any shortfalls in their budgets. Secondly, that would be done through the in-year monitoring rounds when we have a better picture of the final likely receipts, costs and consequences. However, it is up to Departments to demonstrate that they have made every effort in their own budgets to facilitate any shortfalls.

If the Royal Exchange project does not go ahead next year, it will be because it is not yet ready to go ahead; however, it will go ahead at some stage. Therefore that project is a reduced requirement for the Department next year, and the moneys for it must be returned to the centre. Where a Department has been voted money — not by me, but by the Assembly — and decides not to do what has been approved, the process of accountability requires Ministers to return that money and allow the Executive to re-examine what they will do with it. No one in the Assembly would be keen on me applying for and receiving £100 million from the Assembly to do something and then returning to my Department and saying, "Stuff that; I'll spend it on something else" without there being a mechanism to hold me to account. That is why when a reduced requirement exists the money must be given back and why a Minister cannot say that he or she will spend the money on something else. It must be given

back, the circumstances must be explained, and the Minister must then rebid for that money.

The reduced requirement for the Royal Exchange project involved money being voted to DSD to carry out a regeneration project in the centre of Belfast, a project that the Executive and the Assembly felt was a good use of money. However, if that money is not to be used for that project next year, the Minister must surrender it and a decision must be made on what to do with it. Whether it is spent on housing or on offsetting the costs of the receipt that is not available from Crossnacreevy will be a discussion that the Executive must hold and at which the Minister must present her case.

Mr Durkan: In the spirit of light and joy, I thank the Minister for his statement.

The Minister may agree that relying on monitoring rounds to manage what have increasingly become underlying pressures has run its course. However, in many ways, today's review is a super monitoring round, which is really about how the pressures are absorbed and passed out among Departments.

The Minister rightly drew our attention to the fact that not only is the current squeeze being managed but there is likely to be a severe tightening in future because of the other factors that he mentioned. Does the Minister agree that we cannot absorb those pressures in the same form of exercise that is currently being conducted and that it will take something more structural and strategic?

Furthermore, will the Minister reconsider his attitude to the proposal of some Members for a fundamental recasting of the Budget? That would involve categorising the different Budget lines into those that wholly cover front line services, those that mainly cover front line services and so on, the whole way down to purely administrative categories. The Minister talked about reducing bureaucracy and protecting front line services, and such a reclassification would allow us to create an articulate Budget information service that we could use when lobbying the Treasury and others to defend our needs and also to prove that we have a Budget system that is targeting and meeting need and making changes.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We must live with the situation that we have at present. We are now in January, and the Budget must be ready by the end of March to enable Departments to plan their spending in the best way possible, particularly given the uncertainty that the Member raised regarding what might be coming in the middle of the year. The Member may want to call our budgetary process a "super monitoring round", but it puts in place plans for such a contingency.

The Member also asked about the future. Once we have the comprehensive spending review for the next three years — I do not think that it will be available until after the general election — it will be examined by the Assembly, and we can have the debate that the Member requested.

I have not mentioned a certain point thus far, as no one has raised it with me. As far as other preparations are concerned, the Member is correct: if the reductions that we anticipate are as severe as we believe that they will be, it will be difficult to manage that by simply tampering around the edges of departmental budgets. One reason that my Department has set up the invest to save fund of £26 million is to encourage Ministers to look ahead now and determine where savings can be made.

Yesterday afternoon, I had a discussion with the Minister of Agriculture, who drew to my attention a particular problem that, at present, is costing the Executive tens of millions of pounds. She believes that, if we spent around a couple of millions of pounds, those kinds of costs could be avoided. That is where the invest to save fund comes in. Ministers can look ahead and see where, if they had another couple of millions of pounds to spend, ten times that amount could be saved in every future year. That is preparation for the kind of scenario that the Member has described.

It might have been easy for my Department to provide £26 million to help each Department to avoid losing £2 million. However, that would have been short-sighted. My Department has tried to make long-term preparations. When the comprehensive spending review takes place, we will look at the Budget for the next three years. At that stage, we will have an opportunity to look at the whole budgetary process.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It would be churlish not to acknowledge that the Minister had a difficult job. He gave timely warning and spelled out to the Assembly the significant pressures that were building up, particularly because the Assembly has a fixed Budget. It does not have a normal budgetary process in which money that it is possible to generate through revenue can be balanced against ambitions and spending plans. When the global economy goes into decline, that has an effect here. When Westminster decides to top-slice some public spending budgets, that has a direct impact here. The Assembly must take that on board. The matter will now be referred to Departments and Committees. Hopefully, they will apply both the equality impact assessment process and the test of what are true efficiencies, by examining whether the same outputs and service delivery can be generated with less input.

Will the Minister remind the Assembly what stocks of both current and capital end-year flexibility are available to the Executive at present? It is difficult to

get books to balance in that respect. What level of access has been agreed with the Treasury? A key question is: to what extent have the current stocks of end-year flexibility already been committed?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I do not carry that kind of detailed knowledge in my head. Therefore, I will rely on officials to give me the answer to those questions. I think that the Member opposite sits down and thinks about how he can catch me out on certain figures. He always asks me these wee questions on individual figures. I admit that I did not have those figures. My officials have supplied me with some, which I hope that I have heard correctly. At present, the stock of end-year flexibility is £30 million of current and £50 million of capital. If I have misheard officials, I will write to the Member and to you, Mr Speaker, with the correct figures, so that they can be corrected in the record.

12.15 pm

The Member also mentioned administration, as did the Member who spoke previously, who asked whether there could be a Budget picture that tells us what is happening in administration. We have administrative lines in each of the budgets that are clear to be seen, and there are 5% efficiency savings to be made on those. I have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues about that, and we have adhered rigidly to the proposal that, if someone wishes to have more money spent on administration, it can only happen if money has been surrendered by somebody else's Department. No reclassification is allowed unless money is actually available from somewhere else to reclassify for people's administrative budgets in another Department. We have tried to be as rigorous as possible on administrative savings and avoiding any impact on front line service.

Mr Ford: I heard with interest what the Minister said about the invest to save fund. The example he quoted of spending a couple of million pounds in order to save tens of millions implies that there is a payback period of about six weeks, which one would have assumed would have been covered within the Department's budget for that year. However, given that he has not said very much about the detail of it, will he give us some idea of the expected rate of return from that sort of investment and how it would be applied, given that it is a relatively modest sum? In particular, will Departments be discussing their proposals with their Committees? Will the Minister give us some idea as to whether he will be encouraging Departments to consider the costs of segregation and division in the application of that fund?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have made it clear that Departments will be consulting Committees. They will be expected to publish how

they will make those savings and then to discuss that in full with their Committees. I am not clear whether Mr Ford was asking whether Departments would be discussing with Committees any applications for the invest to save fund. However, I assume that Ministers will wish to do that. How will the invest to save fund be applied and what rate of return do we expect? Mr Ford is right: it is a modest sum of money. However, if one could get the kind of return that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development told me could be made in a year for the kind of investment that she is talking about, which would then be ongoing for years after that, the savings could be quite substantial.

We will set criteria and make judgements on the applications. Ministers will have to show what kind of savings might be made from their application, how quickly those savings could be found and whether they will be one-off or ongoing savings. We will also take into account the pressures on individual Departments. There will be a number of ways in which we can judge all of that. At the end of the day, the Executive will make the decision on the applications that are made.

I am hopeful that substantial savings can be made. I hope that Ministers will be inventive when looking for savings with their officials and that they will look clearly for modest amounts of money that could have those ongoing savings and quantify them so that we can make the judgements. Those are the kind of things that I expect. If the Member and the Committees come up with suggestions about other aspects that should be looked at or what other criteria we should apply, I will be more than happy to hear from them when we come to allocate the moneys that are available.

With regard to the cost of division, I have made it clear time and time again in the Assembly that, as far as I am concerned, if we are spending money in such a way that it does not give the best return to the public purse, we ought to look at that. I do not adopt any ideological position on the matter. The Member and his party believe that the costs of division represent an area in which huge savings could be made. Many of the examples that he gives about duplication are due to social and economic conditions, rather than the cost of division. We must also recognise that the reality in Northern Ireland is that some of those things are not easily swept aside, and we will live with the legacy of them for some time. Of course, where it can be identified that there is duplication because of the costs of division and that there is a feasible and workable way of avoiding that duplication and reducing that spending, I would expect Ministers to bring that to Committees, and I would expect Committees to endorse it and that it would be part of the Budget.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his statement. He said that he would be able to deal with the main shortfall from the expected slippage of two major

capital investment projects. He has already mentioned one of those, the Royal Exchange, and the other could be the strategic waste management project. Will he outline how definite that slippage is, particularly in relation to the strategic waste management project, and whether he believes that taking away with one hand to fill the gap somewhere else is an adequate way to conduct public finances?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The fact is that, if the money cannot be spent in one particular year, something has to be done with it, otherwise it would simply be given back to the Treasury. Therefore, I think that is the adequate way of dealing with the issue. I am not exactly sure of the degree of time slippage in the strategic waste management project, but I know that money that was meant to be spent in the next financial year is not likely to be spent until 2012. Rather than going back to the Treasury, it will be used to offset other things, such as the lack of receipts from Crossnacreevy or somewhere else. That is a sensible approach. The Minister of the Environment can probably give more detail on exactly how much slippage there is.

Of course, the money will have to be spent eventually, but, if by 2012 or 2013 the economic situation has changed and we can receive the receipts from Crossnacreevy, then the money will go into the projects that have slipped. That is the rationale behind our approach. It is a sensible rationale, and it is much better to reallocate the money to Departments in Northern Ireland than to give it back to the Treasury, which, I am sure, would gratefully receive it from us. However, we will do our best to hold on to it.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for his statement. What is the read-across between the revised Budget and the Programme for Government, and what strategic approach was taken by the Executive to ensure that overarching objectives, such as modernising the economy and protecting public services, will still be maintained?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The approach that we took was designed to do exactly what the Member asks about: ensure that the Budget still reflects the Programme for Government. The easy way to have done that would have been to acknowledge that we had savings to make and decide that every Department should take a certain hit, a pro rata cut, end of story. That would have saved me interminable meetings with each Minister and their Department and would have been a quick and easy solution. No one could have denied that they were being treated fairly.

I will be frank: there are Ministers from my own party who will not be particularly happy with the review, because I have not shown any partisan approach to the Budget. Indeed, some of the Departments that have DUP Ministers have been hit harder than other Departments

have been. That is a reflection of the fact that we have adopted a strategic approach, considering how we can target the cuts so as to keep the spending in line with the priorities that we have set in the Programme for Government.

That is reflected in two ways. First, the Departments that deal with economic development have not been hit as hard as the average across the board, despite the point made earlier by Mr Farry. Secondly, we know that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety delivers front line services for which there is a big demand in Northern Ireland, and its budget has been cut the least of all.

We have sought to protect the economy and front line services. Moreover, through the invest to save fund, we are seeking to ensure more efficient delivery of services, which is a priority for many Members. Departments will be given some money with which they can look at how they might make efficiency savings.

Mr Savage: I was glad to hear the Minister say that he is not adopting a partisan approach. That is the first time that I have heard a Minister of Finance and Personnel talk sense in the House.

Mr McNarry: Steady on now, George.

Mr Savage: I mean what I say; I will give anyone credit where credit is due. The Minister of Finance and Personnel said, following his discussions with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, that substantial savings could be made. I am glad that an opportunity exists to cut bureaucracy and red tape and to get down to business. Much can be done by taking a simple approach, so I am glad to hear the Minister's comments. The Minister did not fall into the trap that Mr Ford laid: he would not discuss the details of the invest to save fund before it is discussed in the various Committees. I am glad to see that the Minister is taking that approach, and I hope that it —

Mr Speaker: The Member must come to his question.

Mr Savage: I hope that the Minister's approach will be followed in the House.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I do not think that a question was asked, but I accept the Member's commendation. The cynic in me means that, when I hear such comments, I wonder when the boot is coming in. Mr McNarry, who is sitting beside Mr Savage, is very good at doing that. He makes a lovely statement, only to put the boot in after, and I am sure that he will live up to that reputation in future.

I hope that we have taken a sensible approach, despite all the cynicism outside the Assembly. I suspect that, because of other events, the debate will not get much coverage in the press, but it has been constructive. Members have put their points strongly and shown where they have a different emphasis from mine. I

hope that I have given answers as honestly as possible. Although I was disappointed that the process was slow to get started, the process leading up to today's statement has shown that constructive work was done between me and the Ministers, some of whom have radically different views to me. The process could have been made more difficult by political point scoring, but, by and large, that did not happen, and, if people dig behind the facade, they will see that we do good work for which we are not given credit. Unfortunately, that results in the public seeing a picture of here that is unfair and distorted.

Mr Speaker: That ends questions on the ministerial statement. The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately on the lunchtime suspension. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.29 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council

Inland Waterways Sectoral Format

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in inland waterways sectoral format.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McCausland): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 regarding a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in inland waterways sectoral format. The meeting was held at the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) headquarters at Causeway Exchange, Belfast, on 2 December 2009.

The Executive were represented by myself, as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and Conor Murphy MP MLA, Minister for Regional Development. The Irish Government were represented by Éamon Ó Cuív TD, Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. This statement has been agreed with Conor Murphy, and I am making it on behalf of us both.

The chief executive of Waterways Ireland, Mr John Martin, presented a report on progress, which included the provision of 99 metres of additional moorings up to the end of November 2009 and the construction of the remaining bridge to reconnect the Royal canal to the Shannon. Waterways Ireland also continued its marketing activities, with the provision of new publications to promote and support the use of the waterways and the sponsoring of key events on the waterways in 2009.

In relation to the Waterways Ireland business plan and budget for 2009, the Council noted that Waterways Ireland has applied efficiency savings to its 2009 budget in accordance with guidance that was issued by the two Finance Departments. The Council noted the revised 2009 business plan and budget provision, which was subsequently approved by the Minister of Finance and Personnel on 7 December 2009 and approved at the NSMC meeting in tourism sectoral format on 16 December 2009. The Council noted that the Waterways Ireland draft business plan for 2010 is

subject to budgetary considerations and will be brought to a future NSMC meeting for approval.

A progress report was given by Waterways Ireland to the Council on the restoration work on the Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster canal. The Council noted that work on the strategic environmental assessment was due to be completed by the end of 2009 and work on the environmental impact assessment is due for completion in July 2010. It was also noted that possible routes and options are being reviewed.

The Council received a presentation on Waterways Ireland's activities on the Shannon waterway, and it noted that, since 2000, Waterways Ireland has increased the number of moorings by more than 50% and the number of vessels on the Shannon by more than 120%. The severe flooding currently being experienced, particularly along the Shannon, where unprecedented levels of water have been recorded, was also discussed. The Council agreed proposals for a number of property disposals in the context of a range of development projects on the waterways.

It was agreed that the NSMC will meet again in inland waterways sectoral format at a date to be agreed in the second quarter of 2010.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom dhá cheist a chur.

I have two questions for the Minister. In May 2009, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure held a meeting at the Waterways Ireland headquarters in Enniskillen. It was heartening to hear the Minister speak of recent progress in increasing the number of moorings so that more people can enjoy our waterways.

The Minister spoke of a revised budget being agreed for Waterways Ireland for 2009. Will he tell the House how much was cut from the original 2009 budget? What was, or will be, the impact of that revision on service delivery?

Furthermore, the Minister referred to a programme for the completion of the restoration of the Ulster canal from Upper Lough Erne to Clones. The Committee has maintained a keen interest in that issue, and we heard from the Blackwater Regional Partnership about the tourism and economic benefits that will result from the reopening of the canal. The Minister mentioned a number of dates for key milestones to be met, but can he indicate a date for the completion of the overall project?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I will answer the second question first, on progress on the Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster Canal. Waterways Ireland has received the physical survey in a format that allows the preliminary design

process to commence. Work on the environmental impact assessment and the strategic environmental assessment is progressing well, and the environmental impact assessment is due for completion in July 2010.

Possible routes and options are being reviewed, and when the preferred options are identified, the tender for a site investigation will be advertised. Waterways Ireland has met the Department of the Environment and Roads Service about bridges in Northern Ireland, and has also met Monaghan County Council's planning and roads sections. A meeting with DOE planners in Northern Ireland will be held soon.

When a preferred option is identified, it will be developed to the stage that allows it to be forwarded for planning approval. Planning applications should be ready for submission in summer 2010. Pending a successful outcome to the planning process, the land acquisition process will commence, and the contract for the construction phase of the project should be awarded some time in 2011. It is impossible to be more precise about a final date for completion.

The Member also asked about the 2009 budget. Waterways Ireland's budget for 2009 was £33.6 million. Waterways Ireland had applied a 3% efficiency saving to the 2009 budget in accordance with the guidance that it was given by the two Finance Departments. The situation is always somewhat complicated by the exchange rate between the pound and the euro. However, the total 2009 budgetary allocation was £28.61 million from the Irish Republic and £4.99 million from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, making a total of £33.6 million.

There is bound to be some impact on the work of the organisation when savings are made. However, those efficiency savings were determined by the Government in the Irish Republic and by the Assembly. They were absolutely essential, and had to be fitted into the budget arrangements for Waterways Ireland.

Mr T Clarke: I thank the Minister for his statement. He referred to a 50% increase in the number of moorings. What is Waterways Ireland doing to raise the profile of inland waterways as a key tourism product?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am pleased that the Member has drawn attention to the question of raising the profile of waterways as a means to create additional tourism benefits. The Waterways Ireland marketing and promotion strategy was launched in 2004.

On 29 April 2009, the marketing advisory group, made up of representatives of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Tourism Ireland, the Irish Boat Rental Association, Erne Charter Boat Association, the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and the Chambers of Commerce of Ireland met and decided

that Waterways Ireland staff would undertake a review of the strategy in consultation with the advisory group. No external consultants are being brought in, but that revised strategy for marketing waterways and promoting tourism through them will be available for public consultation in early 2010. The key elements in the strategy are: awareness creation; development of corporate identity; promoting greater use of the waterways in partnership with other bodies; and building a platform for sustained development.

Therefore, I hope that the point comes across clearly that a partnership of various organisations, including the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce, is involved in this promotional work. That is important. We have provided additional metres of mooring in Northern Ireland, and that increases the facilities that are available. I hope that in due course we will see the benefits of the marketing and the increased moorings.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas atá déanta aige anseo inniu, agus fáiltímh roimh an dul chun cinn atá déanta san obair thábhachtach seo.

I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome the progress that has been made to date. The Newry canal, which is in my constituency, is one of the most famous canals in the world. In fact, it was one of the first canals to be constructed in these islands. That canal holds tremendous potential for tourism and leisure, as it links Carlingford lough with the north coast via the Upper Bann, Lough Neagh and the Lower Bann. Is there any strategic view for the future that would bring canals such as the Newry canal back into use? Will he outline any plans to do that?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am aware that four local councils own the Newry to Portadown canal. The councils have carried out a feasibility study, but due to lack of capital funding, no further progress has been made towards reopening the waterway. However, the councils involved have carried out extensive capital works to provide what has become hugely popular pedestrian and cycle access on the entire towpath between Portadown and Newry.

Mr McCarthy: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. I would like to comment on the success so far of what has been happening on the waterways.

The statement says:

"The Council agreed proposals for a number of property disposals in the context of a range of development projects".

I am a bit concerned when I hear of councils selling off what are probably assets. As I understand it, there are communities, including small hamlets and villages along the canals and that it was the intention to regenerate them. Among any of the properties that will be disposed of, are there any redundant lock-keeper's

cottages that could be turned into lucrative ventures that would encourage and entice the regeneration of local communities along the canals?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I assure Mr McCarthy that he can rest at ease on that matter. The properties that were disposed of by Waterways Ireland were two in number, and both were in the Irish Republic. Therefore, it is not a matter that will give him any cause for concern. None of the disposals was financially significant.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his submission. We realise the potential that is locked up in Waterways Ireland. I looked at the figures on the number of extra moorings and the increase in vessels on the Shannon. I also listened to the Minister's mention of severe flooding problems along the Shannon. I am a wee bit concerned that Northern Ireland is playing catch up. We have potential here, as my colleague on my right and other Members mentioned. For a moment there, I began to think that Dominic was working for the Tourist Board in Newry. However, we have tremendous potential here. Can the Minister assure me that Northern Ireland is playing catch up here and is doing so in a very positive manner? The potential that lies out there untapped is tremendous.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I agree entirely with what the Member said about the potential of waterways. It may be helpful if I gave an update on the capital works that have been undertaken in Northern Ireland.

2.15 pm

Up to the end of December 2009, Waterways Ireland had completed 56 metres of additional moorings on the Lower Bann, which includes 36 m at Portglenone and 20 m at Camus. Other works on the Lower Bann include 36 m of additional moorings at Hutchinson's quay, which are due to be completed by March 2010; 36 m of additional moorings at Movinagher quay, which are due to be completed by March 2010; the purchase of a jetty for Newferry, Ballymena; the replacement of Movinagher bridge; and the provision of navigational signage. The cost of the total capital works planned for the Lower Bann in 2010 is £455,000.

No additional moorings were completed on the Erne system during 2009, because 482 metres were completed in the previous year. The cost of the planned works for the Erne system this year is £460,000. The cost of planned capital works in 2010 for the Erne/Shannon waterways, to which the Member referred, is just £97,000. With almost £500,000 being invested in the Erne waterways and almost £500,000 being invested in the Lower Bann this year, there will be significant investment in additional moorings and improvements.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his statement. Why was the 2009 business case plan not approved by the NSMC until December 2009?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for her question. The Waterways Ireland business plan for 2009 was presented at the NSMC meeting in inland waterways sectoral format on 16 January 2009, and its content was noted subject to budgetary processes in the two jurisdictions. At that time, the Budget in the Irish Republic had not been settled, and the two Departments of Finance were in discussions about applying efficiency targets for cross-border bodies. In May, Departments were advised by the NSMC secretariat that the two Finance Departments were to agree a joint paper on efficiencies and offer guidance for the preparation of business plans. That guidance was issued by both Finance Departments on 14 September 2009.

The agreed guidance required that the body achieve a minimum of 3% cumulative cash-releasing efficiencies — 3% in 2009 and 6% in 2010 — using indicative budget figures from 16 January as the baseline. The Department of Finance in the Irish Republic approved the 2009 business plan. On 7 December 2009, the Minister of Finance and Personnel in Northern Ireland also approved the business plan, which was then brought to the NSMC meeting in tourism sectoral format on 16 December 2009, when it received final approval. I think that the Member will probably appreciate that such things are somewhat cumbersome.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the statement, which is positive but a little brief. Does the Minister agree that the development of the Lower Bann is absolutely critical to tourism, particularly international tourism on the north coast? The Minister acknowledged the good work of Waterways Ireland. However, is he aware that there is serious erosion of the Lower Bann's riverbanks? Does he agree that there is an absolute need for statutory legislation for the management of the river, so that when the Ulster canal reopens, the river is preserved and can be a Mecca for the whole of the island?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I agree that the Lower Bann has potential in the same way that I think that all the other waterways that have been mentioned today have potential. The issue of erosion was not discussed at the NSMC meeting. However, I will bear that in mind and will undertake to write to the Member about the issue once I know what the current situation is.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill

Second Stage

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill [NIA 5/09] be agreed.

I cannot overstate the importance of protecting, conserving and enhancing our natural environment, particularly our wildlife, and I am determined that the legislation will help to ensure that it remains diverse, healthy and resilient. The legislation will also assist in meeting the international obligation of halting biodiversity loss.

The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 has served us well and been an important tool in halting biodiversity loss. The Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill provides greater scope to meet current and future challenges. Through the Bill, I aim to enhance protection for a larger range of birds, plants and animals. The changes are reflected in the schedules to the Order, which sets out various levels of protection.

The Bill is intended to provide more protection for the species listed through giving the police greater powers to gather evidence. It introduces custodial sentences for severe and persistent wildlife crime and new powers to protect areas of special scientific interest. The Bill proposes a new duty on Departments and other public bodies to further the conservation of biodiversity. In addition, the Bill abolishes elements of the game laws that require anyone hunting or selling game to have a licence. Those laws, which date back to the nineteenth century, are no longer relevant.

The Bill comprises 36 clauses and three schedules. I do not intend to comment on every clause. However, I will highlight some issues and expand on those that were mentioned earlier.

Clauses 1, 2 and 3 establish a new duty on government and public bodies. It will require all Departments, including the Department of the Environment (DOE), to further the conservation of biodiversity when undertaking their functions. Public bodies, such as district councils, will be required to fulfil that duty. The conservation of nature is an essential part of the commitments contained in the Northern Ireland sustainable development strategy, which was published in 2006 and complements the Northern Ireland biodiversity strategy that the Executive adopted in 2000.

The introduction of a duty on Departments and public bodies will raise the profile of biodiversity and

promote biodiversity issues as a natural part of policy-making throughout the public sector. I am aware of the good work that Departments and public bodies already do through the biodiversity implementation plan to promote the conservation of biodiversity. That process is led by the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group, and an example of that work is the provision of nesting boxes for swifts in the new library that is being built in Antrim. Actions to promote biodiversity need not be complex or expensive. For example, a decision not to cut small areas of grass in the Stormont estate would encourage wildlife and save money.

I turn now to offences. It is vital that we all act in a responsible manner when in the countryside. Clauses 5 and 6 extend the scope of a number of existing offences that are contained in the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. Anyone who acts in a reckless manner that causes harm to wildlife will be committing an offence. The Bill strengthens controls on the use of snares. Snares are used by landowners and land managers to control pests, and many farmers use snares during the lambing season to capture foxes. To avoid unnecessary suffering, that practice must be subject to strict standards, and, therefore, the Bill includes a requirement for snares to be regularly inspected.

Changes are proposed to the provisions for managing our wild deer population. In recent times, the numbers of deer have increased, and, therefore, it is time to provide mechanisms that will allow for the effective control of the deer population. Accordingly, clause 16 gives my Department the power to issue licences allowing deer to be taken or killed out of season. That action could be allowed for purposes such as ensuring public safety or preventing serious damage to crops. However, strict conditions will apply before such licences can be granted. Clause 26 extends the season for culling hinds and does by bringing forward the start of the open season to 1 October.

Robust enforcement powers are necessary to stop wildlife crime. It is vital that the enforcement authorities, principally the police and the Department's wildlife inspectors, have the necessary powers. Clause 19 provides stronger stop and search powers for the police. Under the authority of a magistrate's warrant, police will have the power to access premises to investigate a wider range of wildlife offences. For the first time, police will have the authority to avail themselves of DNA sampling techniques to investigate the ancestry of specimens. Those powers will be subject to relevant controls, including the requirement that samples from live animal specimens be taken only by veterinary surgeons. There is also a requirement that police officers leave premises in the same secure manner in which they were found.

Clause 22 will give the courts powers to impose custodial sentences for serious offences against

wildlife, such as stealing the eggs of rare birds. The threat of imprisonment should deter persistent offenders from committing serious wildlife crimes. I am thinking in particular of crimes such as badger baiting or shooting birds of prey. I want to reinforce the message that we value our wildlife and want to see it properly maintained and safeguarded.

Schedules to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 list different levels of protection for plants, birds and animals. Those schedules have been reviewed to reflect the current conservation status of many species in Northern Ireland. Additional species, such as the tree sparrow and the sand martin, will be given full protection for the first time. Marine species, such as the basking shark, are also included. My Department will have a new duty to review the schedules every five years. That will ensure that we take account of changing population trends.

The Irish hare has been the subject of much attention in recent years, and after careful consideration of the scientific evidence, I do not propose to change the level of protection to that game species.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Excuse me, Minister. A mobile phone is interfering with the sound equipment. I ask everyone to check that their mobile phones are switched off.

The Minister of the Environment: Instead, practical conservation actions should continue to focus on the main cause of population decline, which is the loss of a suitable habitat. My officials are working closely with landowners and field sport organisations on methods to ensure that an adequate habitat is maintained for that unique species. The species action plan for the Irish hare will be reviewed in 2010. In that review, officials will put forward practical and achievable actions and targets to assist and maintain a sustainable population of Irish hares.

I am also taking the opportunity to make some amendments to part 4 of the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002. That proposal is designed to enhance protection for our areas of special scientific interest (ASSI). Clauses 27 to 30 include provisions for new offences in relation to actions by third parties that damage the futures of ASSIs, such as damage to an ASSI due to the use of quad bikes on land without the landowner's knowledge. An offence is also created when public bodies fail to notify the Department of their consent to operations that are likely to damage an ASSI.

Finally, I propose to amend the laws that relate to the hunting and trading of game species. Clause 31 abolishes the requirement that anyone who hunts or sells game has to be licensed. That requirement dates back to the early 1800s, when it was needed to curb poaching on large estates. However, it is no longer needed. My Department is responsible for the

conservation and management of game species. Responsibility for administering game licences rests with the Department for Social Development. Margaret Ritchie has agreed that the Bill offers an ideal opportunity to carry through those reforms.

Clause 32 removes the restriction that game can be sold only at certain times of the year. Modern refrigeration techniques and food safety standards mean that such restrictions are no longer necessary. I stress that laws that relate to poaching will remain in place and it will be an offence to sell illegally taken game.

I commend the Bill to the Assembly. It will have a positive and practical impact on the conservation of biodiversity and the protection of our wildlife. It will also bring us into line with the provisions in Great Britain and further transpose the requirements of the birds directive. It provides the authorities with responsibility for enforcing the provisions of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 by giving them the suitable powers to do so, and it offers an appropriate level of deterrent to those involved in wildlife crime.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mrs D Kelly): As the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, I welcome the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill. This comprehensive Bill consists of 36 clauses and three schedules and has been introduced to reflect the increasing significance of protecting our biodiversity and deterring wildlife crime.

In 2007, before my time in the Committee, the Committee noted its concern about the current provision for protecting areas of special scientific interest in the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 and sought more information from the Department.

The response indicated that future changes to the 2002 Order through a wildlife Bill should address the Committee's concerns. I hope that, some two years later, the Committee will not be disappointed. I note the measures that the Minister outlined this afternoon, and I will touch on areas of special scientific interest later.

2.30 pm

In February 2009, the Committee sought the views of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) on the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. The RSPB stated that wildlife crime is a major issue in Northern Ireland and outlined that it received 63 reports of wildlife crime between January 2006 and June 2008. It stressed that that number is likely to represent under-reporting because the public tend not to report on wildlife crime.

The RSPB told the Committee that wildlife laws need to be comprehensive and that people who commit

serious wildlife crime should receive custodial sentences to deter others. In the body's view, the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 is long out of date and no longer fit for purpose because it has not been fundamentally reviewed since it was created. It believes that the Order is inadequate to protect species in Northern Ireland and called for a wide range of changes, including the introduction of a licence system for shoots and a duty on all public bodies and their officers in Northern Ireland to further the conservation of biodiversity. I note that such provision is included in the Bill and look forward to scrutinising it in more detail to determine whether the proposed legislation is up to the task.

The Committee's recent inquiry and report on climate change recommended an urgent need for Northern Ireland to produce a climate change strategy that recognises the importance of biodiversity to Northern Ireland, the commitments that have already been made for its protection and the need to halt its decline. The Committee recommended that the strategy should incorporate guiding principles for protecting biodiversity. Therefore, the Committee welcomes the provision that will introduce a new statutory duty on Departments and public bodies to further the conservation of biodiversity, and we will liaise closely with public authorities on that area of the Bill.

Last year, the Committee agreed with the RSPB's call for custodial sentences for wildlife crimes and its view that Northern Ireland should be on a par with Great Britain in that regard. It subsequently wrote to the Secretary of State to say that stronger penalties, as have been introduced in England, Scotland and Wales, would offer an increased and robust deterrent to people who are involved in wildlife crime and that that must be considered for Northern Ireland. Therefore, the introduction of the Bill is welcome because it will introduce the measures that I have outlined.

I will touch on several other important areas of the Bill. It aims to improve the management and protection of areas of special scientific interest by ensuring that ignorance is no longer accepted as a defence and by giving the Department the power to issue stop notices. The Committee welcomes those powers, which will ensure that public bodies are obliged to inform the Department when they have authorised or permitted anyone to undertake an operation that may damage any features of an area of special scientific interest. The Bill will certainly create greater enforcement powers. However, as always, the Committee will want to know how those powers will be carried out in practice and the resources that will be dedicated to them. We look forward to receiving further information from officials at Committee Stage.

The Committee is already concerned about the control of vacancies in the Environment Agency. Many

enforcement officers and not being replaced, and the Committee will be mindful of that fact. Moreover, the Committee will seek input into its scrutiny of the Bill from the PSNI, which will continue to have a crucial role in the protection of our wildlife.

I welcome the protection of the nests of certain birds under the Bill, as called for by the RSPB. I also welcome the introduction of an offence for anyone who damages or destroys birds' nests at any time of the year. The RSPB states that some of our most familiar birds have been "red listed" following long-term declines of over 50%. In other words, for a variety of reasons, those birds' future as an Irish species is at risk. The recent killing of a red kite highlights the risks that birds face. The Committee watched red kites flying in County Down in February 2009, and members were impressed by the work that had gone into the reintroduction of the species into the North and the local community's considerable buy-in to the project.

I hope that the Bill will go some way to better protect those birds, help to bring the perpetrators of that recent crime to justice and allow red kites to flourish once again on the island.

The Committee is aware that there is disappointment in some quarters that the Minister of the Environment has decided not to give full statutory protection in the Bill to some well-known species such as the Irish hare and the curlew. The Committee recognises the need to protect those species and has been involved in the alternative approaches that the Department of the Environment has taken to protect them while numbers remain under threat. However, I am sure that the Committee will take the opportunity to consider the long-term implications of the protection of those species during its consideration of the Bill. There has also been a surprising reaction to the proposals laid out to allow the continued use of snares for the taking or killing of wild animals across the North. I am sure that the Committee will want to consider that aspect of the Bill in more detail over the next few weeks.

I welcome the provision in the Bill to review the species lists in schedule 1 every five years. As I said earlier, the RSPB had voiced concerns that the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 had not been fundamentally reviewed since it came into effect and was inadequate to protect species in Northern Ireland. It is to be hoped that the provision for review will ensure that the lists remain up to date and accurate in order to protect the most vulnerable living things in Northern Ireland and in our surrounding seas.

I should point out that not all aspects of the Bill fall naturally to the Committee for the Environment to consider. Game and game dealer licensing is, as the Minister said, a function of the Department for Social

Development. The Committee for the Environment will invite the Committee for Social Development to consider the proposal for the abolition of such licences and make its position known to us.

As soon as the House commends the Bill to the Committee, we will call for written submissions from interested organisations and individuals. Members will be extremely interested to hear their views. Last week, Committee members received a pre-legislative briefing from the Department's Bill team, and I look forward to having a good ongoing working relationship with the officials to ensure that my Committee can scrutinise the legislation properly.

In general, the Bill seeks to strengthen the protection of wildlife and our natural environment. On behalf of the Committee, which, I know, wishes for greater environmental protection, I support the principles of the Bill. If I may go off script, Mr Deputy Speaker, on a personal note, I have been heartened by the coverage of the issue and the keen interest that the general public has shown in the protection of birds, particularly during the recent cold snap. I hope that people will make an effort to respond once our consultation begins.

Mr Weir: I support the Bill, which deals with an important subject. I note that the lesser-spotted Wells has entered the Chamber to lend his support. There will be strong support for the Bill on all sides of the House, because it is sensible and important to protect our wildlife, which is something that we wish to preserve for future generations. I will address issues of detail later, but it is important to note that the Bill has been welcomed not only by all parties but by a range of environmental groups, particularly those that are most directly connected to its broad thrust, such as the RSPB.

I will speak about a few aspects of the Bill that are particularly welcome. The commitment in clause 1 to the duty to conserve biodiversity has been put in very strong terms, which are compatible with our international obligations and will put Northern Ireland at the cutting edge of that objective. As the Chairperson said, the provisions in the Bill for the protection of nests are important and are to be welcomed.

A range of other issues has been highlighted, in particular the introduction of new offences that will clamp down on those who would interfere with our wildlife and try to destroy it. It is important that environmental crime be tackled strongly.

The aim of the Bill is to enhance protection for a larger range of birds, plants and animals, as the Minister said. We would all strongly welcome that. Having referred to such a cross-party consensus, I must deny rumours that my colleague Mr Shannon is locked up in a room, tied to a chair. However, I see his

constituency colleague Mr Hamilton hovering somewhat vulture-like, so I hope that he is not here as Mr Shannon's representative. He seems to be washing his hands of that element. There is much to be welcomed in the Bill, but there is also a lot of complexity. Therefore, I believe that it merits a lot of scrutiny.

The Chairperson has mentioned the RSPB, and that is the key environmental group with respect to the legislation. I met some RSPB representatives yesterday to discuss some of the detail of the Bill. I should declare an interest, as my father, Jim Weir, was a founder member of the RSPB in Northern Ireland. He was a member of the pre-existing Ulster Society for the Protection of Birds when it merged with the RSPB. Perhaps, therefore, I come to the issue with a degree of bias.

The RSPB has highlighted that some detail will have to be teased out. Mention has been made of the curlew and how it is treated and whether it should be included in schedule 1 or schedule 2. There are also questions around the level of protection that there needs to be around shooting, and a lot of good work has been done with the British Association for Shooting and Conservation. The slight complication with that is that not all groups have signed up to it.

Further examination and work needs to be done on a range of issues, such as with schedule 9 and the issues of non-native species and temporary stop notices. Although some very welcome protections are offered through ASSIs, there are questions about the level of protection that can be offered to areas that fall outside that classification. I understand that the RSPB and departmental officials are due to meet reasonably soon, and I am confident that those are elements of detail that can be ironed out.

I was heartened by the approach taken by departmental officials. The Committee received a very useful briefing at our last meeting in which it was indicated that each side is keen that there is flexibility, to ensure that all the details are got right. That may mean tweaking the legislation or it may mean that we have to consider having subordinate legislation to deal with certain areas.

Although there are elements of detail to be ironed out, the broad thrust of the Bill is very welcome. I congratulate the Department on bringing it forward. Providing that level of protection to our wildlife in Northern Ireland, particularly our bird population, will preserve the best of Northern Ireland for generations to come. We have all grown up with that level of opportunity. I know that the Minister has had a strong connection with the countryside throughout his life, but one of my concerns is that as we move increasingly towards a more sedentary family lifestyle,

the opportunity for people to connect with nature and the rural community seems to be missing. That is an important link that has been eroded in our society. We have to preserve the best of our countryside in a sensible fashion so that the opportunity to connect with nature is preserved for future generations, and that is what is proposed in the Bill.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member join me in congratulating the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ on its recent publication that showed birds of Northern Ireland? That is of great educational value, not only to our young people, but to people who appreciate rural and country life.

Mr Weir: I welcome anything that increases our connection with nature. I am sure that the Member liked looking at the pictures. It is important that our knowledge of nature is deepened.

Whether such knowledge comes from the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ or publications from the National Trust or another organisation, it should be embraced. It is very much in keeping with the spirit of the Bill, and the House should unite in welcoming it. I urge Members to support the Bill.

2.45 pm

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an Bhille.

I will speak in favour of the Bill. One would think that Mr Wells is a bird, given the way that he has just flown into the Chamber. Sinn Féin welcomes the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill and looks forward to the RSPB’s contribution to the Bill process. The Bill will complement and enhance existing legislation to ensure the protection of our habitats and wildlife in the North. Thus, it is crucial that the new legislation is comprehensive, fit for purpose and that it meets future challenges.

Changes must be made to the Bill to ensure that it provides protection to wildlife and that it is compliant with relevant European directives. Given the inclusion of a duty to further the conservation of biodiversity, we must ensure that proper guidance is issued to enable public bodies to conserve and protect our indigenous species of flora and fauna and habitats. The introduction of any biodiversity strategy is vital and must ensure the conservation of our species. However, surely that will be achieved only if important species are identified through the provision of proper research, which will ultimately ensure their protection.

As the Chairperson said, the Committee recently saw, at first hand, the project to reintroduce the red kite to the North, and we hope that it is a success. However, other bird species that are under severe threat must be protected through proper monitoring. In particular, the curlew should be included in schedule 1 under the

specialist penalties provision. Several other species that are declining in number should be considered for inclusion in the Bill to ensure the recovery of their population. You will be glad to hear that I am not going to read out lists of birds that require protection, but we will have a chance to examine those in more detail during the Committee Stage of the Bill.

Sinn Féin believes that, to protect our wild birds, animals and plant life, appropriate measures should be in place to deal with people who damage or harm our natural environment and wildlife. We welcome the suggestion that amendments should be made in respect of the offences clauses. We also support a complete ban on the use of snares, and I am disappointed that clause 10 falls short of that. Snares are not target specific, and any animal, including domestic pets, livestock and protected species, such as the Irish hare, can fall victim to them. In many instances, snares result in prolonged periods of pain and suffering for the trapped animal. The aim of the Bill should be to protect and sustain our wildlife. Therefore, it should seek to introduce more humane methods of control and address undue nuisances, especially to farm livestock.

I support the introduction of mechanisms for the management of wild deer in the North. Measures are needed to prevent incidents involving damage to property and our natural heritage and threats to public safety, such as last year’s incident in Camlough. However, it should be borne in mind that wildlife viewing is a much-loved recreation activity, and we must seek to strike a balance. The welfare of animals must be a factor and, therefore, the type of damage that warrants the destruction of an animal must be clearly defined.

Hundreds of deer are culled lawfully and humanely each year to keep numbers down in order to stop damage to farms. However, many more are being killed cruelly by poachers who seek to sell the meat on the black market. Apart from the cruelty and illegality, what concerns me most is that many of those deer may be diseased or contaminated. There are no controls, and people do not know what they are eating when they buy meat from unscrupulous poachers. I support the principles of the Bill and look forward to the scrutiny at Committee Stage.

Mr Kinahan: I, too, am very pleased to speak on such an important Bill. We all need to find a balance between how we live with nature in the countryside, and how we manage our existence. At a meeting last night, I was intrigued to hear that, in 1906, people struggled to work out how to prevent flax effluent from entering our rivers and destroying them. Therefore, it is not as though this issue is new; it is something that we have long been trying to deal with and learning about. We need to set up a dynamic system, as this Bill does extremely well, so that we

review constantly how we strike a balance and how to best live in the countryside.

I welcome the Bill, which tidies up rather ancient laws. I was double-jobbing the other day; perhaps those Bills are antiques, although they are not worth anything. The Bill tidies up many areas. First, it places a duty on all public bodies to conserve diversity. Secondly, it places a duty on the Department to produce a biodiversity strategy. There is much more in the Bill, but I will not go into it in great detail. I am very happy to be a member of the Environment Committee.

Earlier in the parliamentary year, I spoke about the Forestry Bill. It is extremely important that the Department and Committee speak regularly to stakeholders. We should continually talk to all who know better than us so that we ensure a dynamic flow of information. I am not asking for a quango, but we should use the experts.

We have received an extremely good document from the RSPB, about which all Members have spoken. It is an excellent brief, and we will receive many more briefs from other bodies. I too will highlight the case of the curlew. When I was small, I remember my mother pointing out the call of the curlew. I have not heard it since then. I was 10 years old at that time, so it is 40 years since I have heard a curlew on any land on which I have stood. We need to ensure that the curlew is protected.

We also need to take up the RSPB's point on the need to explain the biodiversity duty and what it means. We need to look continually at the placing of wildlife in the right schedules, as I have already touched on with the curlew. We need to listen continually. In that respect, however, there are lots of terms that need clarification, such as "native", "non-native", "wild" and "wild state".

I declare an interest because I farm a very small herd of deer. They are not wild in that they are not free to go wherever they want, but they are of a wild state because one cannot corner them to deal with them. A sharpshooter is needed to shoot them. They are then taken to a butcher. "Wild" and "wild state" need to be defined, and that is the case in many more areas.

Mr McCarthy: That is cruel.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much. It would be cruel if I tried to shoot them because most of Templepatrick would be gone before I hit a deer.

When we are looking at the names of certain species, it is easy for all of us. Many of us will know the birds. However, when it comes to plants, how many Members know what a green figwort, or scrophularia umbrosa, is? There are many more such terms in the Bill, so there is a strong need for

education. We had an idea of including photographs because there is a lot of education that needs to go alongside the Bill. It is all very well to place the duty on government and local councils, but we need to educate the general public. Those terms and names need to be understood fully.

I welcome the extra provisions on areas of special scientific interest (ASSI), particularly the need to know who owns the areas. When someone moves on, we need to know who the next owner is. Ignorance is not an excuse. However, I plead that, whatever we set up, we do it softly. Liaison groups have been established, and we should talk as best we can to the people who are on the ground and live in those areas. For example, on a National Trust estate on the border, there is a plant called the sally, which I believe is a form of salix, or willow. It is totally taking over all of the lakes because it is protected and cannot be cut back. We do not want to have to wait five years to get permission. We need to set up a dynamic system so that we can alter things within that five-year period.

We need to continue, and I will keep making the point, talking to all the groups that know. I welcome the annulment of Crown immunity. Although appointing wildlife inspectors is a good idea, I query where we are going with them and how. Allowing inspectors to enter premises and take samples is fine as long as there is a means for the people who own the land, and others, to work well with them and get reparation for any damage that might be done.

We need to work out where the PSNI is with this. On the one occasion that I had to deal with the PSNI, when a deer was lost, I could not find anyone who even knew what a deer looks like. Presently, only one PSNI officer is trained to deal with wildlife; we will need many more. Therefore, to ensure that the Bill can work throughout Northern Ireland, we need to look at training.

I welcome the clause on penalties: the six-month custodial sentence and fines. However, in England, there was a case in which a whole wood — five acres — of bluebells was stolen in one night and sold for profit. Therefore, the fines should potentially be extremely large. Nonetheless, the other day in the Committee for the Environment, we learned that when the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is successful in collecting a fine, the money goes to the Treasury. We should try to find a way to hold such money in Northern Ireland.

I, too, will mention snares. I do not like the idea of unnecessary suffering, particularly suffering for 24 hours. If your leg is in a trap, your suffering is unnecessary from the moment it is in it. We should look at whether to ban snaring or to introduce strict licensing. Although there are other ways to deal with

foxes, they all pose similar problems. I welcome the fact that there will be six new offences, and I welcome the idea of controlling. However, I query whether we will have the resources, funding and ability to enforce them.

To return to my original point, much education is needed and we must keep talking to each other. I welcome much in the Bill, but we need a mechanism for flexibility. The Ulster Unionist Party supports the Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Given that Question Time is due to commence at 3.00 pm, Members should take their ease until then. After Question Time, Mr Ford will be the first Member to speak.

The debate stood suspended.

3.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Pension Credit

1. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister for Social Development what steps her Department is taking to ensure that all eligible pensioners are claiming pension credit. (AQO 561/10)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I share the Member's desire to ensure that everyone entitled to a benefit receives it. My Department provides a range of services to make people aware of their pension entitlements, including outreach services; participation in local promotional activity; the production of specific publications, some in minority ethnic languages, on the Department for Social Development (DSD) and Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) websites; a new online benefits adviser service; and general assistance with advice and information through our network of local and centralised offices.

In respect of state pension credit, a new, enhanced telephone claims system that is now in operation results in about 90% of claims being taken by telephone, without the need for people to complete paper application forms. When an applicant calls to make a claim for state pension, they are asked whether they would like to find out more about pension credit. If interested, they are transferred to a dedicated state pension claim line. In addition, the savings threshold for state pension credit was increased from £6,000 to £10,000 in November 2009. People already getting state pension credit had their award automatically adjusted. I also issued a news release to raise awareness of that change.

On top of those services, a targeted approach to benefit uptake was introduced in 2005. About 50,000 invitations have been issued to older people, offering a benefit assessment through the advice sector; 250,000 mailshots have been sent out to raise awareness of state pension credit; and by June 2009, those exercises had generated an additional £22.4 million in payment of annual benefit and arrears. The 2009-2010 benefit uptake programme has provided almost 20,000 older people with potential entitlement to state pension credit and the opportunity of a benefit assessment through Citizens Advice. In addition, a new outreach

approach commenced in late November, focusing on ensuring that older people are aware of their potential entitlement across four council areas with a high older population but a relatively low uptake of the main pensioner benefits.

The answer to the question: “What are we doing?” is “Quite a lot.”

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for her reply. With pension credits being linked to cold weather payments, is the Minister content that the system is effective in meeting one of her stated aims of tackling fuel poverty and helping those most in need, particularly given the weather that we have had over such a prolonged period?

The Minister for Social Development: The Member is absolutely correct. There is a need to tackle fuel poverty on an ongoing basis, and there are two financial mechanisms in the benefits system to deal with that issue. The first is the age-specific winter fuel payments, which are paid automatically to pensioners.

Cold weather payments are a different type of benefit. They are triggered when the Met Office’s observation sites, of which there are about seven in Northern Ireland, tell us that there has been a temperature of zero or below for seven consecutive days. To qualify for that payment, a person must have been receiving state pension credit, income support, jobseeker’s allowance or employment and support allowance for one day in the period of cold weather. They must also have one of the following: a relevant pensioner or disability premium; child tax credit, which is not relevant to the Member’s question; a child under five years old; and an applicable amount of employment and support allowance that includes the support or the work-related activity components.

It is interesting that we were able to give £12.5 million in cold weather payments over the past three weeks to 166,000 people throughout Northern Ireland.

Those payments are over and above the age-specific winter fuel payments. Therefore, in summation, we are satisfied that we are tackling fuel poverty through those financial mechanisms. However, if Mr McCallister knows of specific cases among his constituents, he can refer them to me, and I will be more than happy to have those cases investigated.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister referred to support being given to advice centres to help people with benefit uptake, mainly pension credit. Will she give details of additional support that her Department will give to advice centres, which are dealing with a wide range of benefits, because they are under increasing pressure to deal with the volume of traffic that they are experiencing as a result of the current economic climate?

The Minister for Social Development: I am conscious of the good work that is undertaken by the advice service network, whether that be citizens advice bureaux, Advice NI or Members’ constituency offices. We provide continuous up-to-date information to people who require benefit advice. In fact, financial assistance has been provided to citizens advice bureaux to undertake the benefit uptake programme for us, and carries out that much-needed benefit assessment check, which enables people to find out to what other benefits they are entitled.

I heard a representative from Age Concern Help the Aged NI speak about the issue recently — on ‘The Stephen Nolan Show’, I think — and I must say that, in addition to ongoing benefit uptake programmes, a new online benefits adviser service allows people to check anonymously to find out whether they, or a family member, could be entitled to claim for additional benefits. That service can be accessed wherever the Internet is available, and people can contact those advice centres and other offices, such as the Social Security Agency, by telephone, by calling in or by having a pension adviser call at their home to assist them with the type of benefit to which they should be entitled.

I assure Members that I share their concern and desire to ensure that everyone who is entitled to a benefit should receive that benefit.

Mr McCarthy: I acknowledge the good work that the Minister’s Department is doing to get the information out to people who are entitled to claim. However, a problem has emerged for senior citizens during the recent spell of cold weather. They have worked hard all their lives, and they have put a few bob extra away, and, as a result, they are not entitled to the cold weather payment. Does the Minister have any sympathy for those people, quite a few of whom are caught in that trap? Does the Minister have any intention of doing anything about that?

The Minister for Social Development: I assure the Member that I have every sympathy with elderly people, particularly pensioners, who have had to deal with the extremely cold weather conditions over the past three weeks. They have felt in a very acute way the pernicious effects of such cold.

The regulations under which cold weather payments are prescribed are dealt with under parity legislation with Britain. I have been in constant contact with my opposite numbers in the Department for Work and Pensions in Britain, because, as Members are only too aware, the money for social security benefits is channelled through annually managed expenditure, comes directly from London and is not part of the Northern Ireland block grant. I have talked to ministerial predecessors in that Department about the

need to upgrade winter fuel payments and cold weather payments. I have also been talking to the current incumbents in that Department to ensure that they know that we have a higher cost of living in Northern Ireland and that people have had to deal with very difficult weather conditions over the past number of weeks.

Naturally, I will come back to the House if there is any change as a result of those representations.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Employment and Support Allowance

3. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the review of the administration of employment and support allowance. (AQO 563/10)

The Minister for Social Development: The House has debated the administration of the employment and support allowance on at least two occasions. The most recent was 30 November 2009, when I agreed to review the administration of the employment and support allowance (ESA), which my Department has been doing.

Members will be aware that the ESA is subject to the principle of social security parity with Britain. That principle applies not only to social security policy, but extends to procedures and general administration, including having a common computer system. Although parity is advantageous to Northern Ireland, in that Britain contributes to the annual —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Excuse me, Minister. Someone in the Chamber has a mobile phone switched on, which could interfere with the recording system.

The Minister for Social Development: For the sake of clarity, I will repeat what I just said: although parity is advantageous to Northern Ireland, in that Britain contributes to the annual shortfall in the Northern Ireland insurance fund, it limits Northern Ireland's ability to make local changes to systems and procedures. Nonetheless, my Department is conducting a review, so that, wherever possible, we can revise the operating procedures in the ESA centre.

Some changes have already been made to improve how the benefit is administered. Those changes, which include the introduction of safeguard visits for vulnerable customers, the provision of interim payments, revised telephony scripts, and arrangements to pay the contributory element of the ESA claims first, have improved performance and the overall service that is provided to the vast majority of customers.

On both occasions when the Assembly debated the introduction of the ESA, it recognised the excellent progress that staff in the ESA centre have made in

introducing the new benefit and the associated technology. Following the most recent debate on 30 November 2009, I sent a letter to Members with a detailed response to concerns that they had raised. I also wrote to Members inviting them to visit the ESA centre at James House. All of that gives Members information on issues that were raised during the previous debate. I hope that Members who have concerns will be able to take up that opportunity to visit the ESA centre.

Although I am pleased with the progress that has been made to date, it is clear that a number of challenges remain to be overcome before the new benefit has bedded in fully. The areas of the administration of the ESA that my Department can affect positively will continue to be subject to review, with improvements implemented accordingly. I assure Members that my officials will continue to work closely with their colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions in London to further improve the processes, procedures and systems that are used to administer the ESA.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Minister Ritchie for her response and for her assurances to the House. Will she give further assurances that in the ongoing improvement of the service, focused attention will be paid continually to the needs of vulnerable members of society, particularly those who have mental-health difficulties, such as people who suffer from autism?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. My Department is engaged in continuous and ongoing improvement of the service. There has been sustained progress in the delivery of the ESA, with significant improvements in the level of service that is provided in such key areas as telephony, fresh-claims processing, handling medical evidence, and carrying out medical examinations, with particular relevance to people who suffer from autism.

That has been a pertinent issue during the past number of months. I have met the National Autistic Society. I have heard clearly its concerns, to which I am particularly sympathetic. My Department will deal with each of those issues in a sensitive, sympathetic manner. Our most important aim is to help people.

I note that on the previous two occasions when the Assembly debated those issues, which were raised, by and large, by the Member's party, the Member himself did not raise particular issues. My Department is happy to keep the matter under review.

3.15 pm

Mr Hamilton: Given the anticipated additional pressure that will be put on the administration of the employment and support allowance as a result of

changes that stem from the welfare reform Bill, what assurance can the Minister give the House and, more importantly, the people outside the Chamber, that the system will be able to cope with the additional pressure that may result from the Bill?

The Minister for Social Development: I assure the Member that we will keep the projected and anticipated workload under review. Should additional resources be required, I would like to think that the Member, as Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, will be able to use his good offices with the Minister of Finance and make the necessary representations on our behalf.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for her full series of answers. Is she content that the objectives of the policy are sound and that those issues surrounding the administration of the employment and support allowance will be addressed?

The Minister for Social Development: The Member raises two particular issues. Naturally, the legislation was originally devised in Westminster. Under parity legislation, we simply translated it here. The purpose of ESA is to help people with an illness or disability to move into work rather than remain on benefits. I appreciate that many people who are ill will not be able to progress into work. However, I assure Members that we treat every case with a great level of sympathy and sensitivity, particularly as many of the people who come to us have a mental illness or some other type of debilitating illness.

Mr Gallagher: We all acknowledge the review of ESA, and it is encouraging to hear that that is ongoing. With regard to the Social Security Agency in general, will the Minister tell us something about targets, particularly the administrative and performance targets that relate to the provision of benefits for the people in Northern Ireland?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mr Gallagher for his question. I am fully aware of his particular concerns about ESA, as he has made several representations to me on behalf of constituents in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. The Social Security Agency has delivered excellent performance since I took up office in May 2007. During that period, the agency faced a particularly challenging environment, including the introduction of the ESA benefit and the implementation of major improvements to the way in which services are provided to pensioners. Those, and other achievements, have been delivered against a loss of 674 staff between 2005-06 and 2007-08 and the requirement to deliver further savings of 5% a year arising from the 2008 Budget settlement, which equates to a reduction of £53.2 million across the three-year period to March 2011.

Despite those challenges, performance has continued to improve year on year. The end of 2008-09 saw losses through fraud and error reduced to 1.2% of expenditure, their lowest level yet; five out of six main benefits met their financial accuracy targets; all of the six main benefits met challenging clearance time targets; and the number of complaints received by the agency maintained its downward trend on the previous year. That performance has been delivered against the economic downturn, which has led to a dramatic increase in the demand for the agency's services, particularly claims for jobseeker's allowance.

The agency has consistently delivered excellent performance year on year and continues to build on its remarkable achievements delivered to date. I have every confidence that the agency will strive to deal with the challenges that lie ahead, while maintaining its high levels of performance and quality of service for people.

Social Housing: Laurencetown and Gilford

4. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Social Development what action her Department is taking to provide affordable social housing in Laurencetown and Gilford, County Down. (AQO 564/10)

The Minister for Social Development: The most recent housing needs assessment carried out by the Housing Executive for Laurencetown and Gilford identified no intensity of need over the next five years. The housing need in both locations is, to quite an extent, being managed through the re-letting of existing homes. It would, therefore, be inappropriate to divert the housing development programme from other areas in which the need is much greater. In September last year, for example, only nine applicants in Gilford were in housing stress, but an average of 15 homes are re-let in the area every year. In Laurencetown, it is a similar story; six applicants were in housing stress and, on average, four homes become available through re-letting each year.

I am conscious that the figures do not always tell the full story, and that is why the Housing Executive will periodically undertake latent demand testing to determine whether there is an emerging need. During 2008, Laurencetown was subject to a latent demand test, but that simply confirmed that there was insufficient need to consider building new homes. The situation is, of course, kept under review, and, if Mr O'Dowd has information to the contrary, I would be happy to receive it.

In both areas, affordable housing is supported through the co-ownership scheme, irrespective of social need. Any such applications would need to fulfil the conditions set down for co-ownership.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. The figures that she gave come as no surprise to me, but she will be aware of many debates in the Chamber on the needs of rural communities, including housing. As a local representative for the area, I find that many families and individuals do not put their names down for housing in those areas. They believe that there is no point in doing so because there are no houses available there. Even when latent demand tests are carried out, that has a knock-on effect, and the elderly in particular subsequently move on to Banbridge.

Does the Minister not agree that we must revise how we measure the latent demand for housing in rural communities? Unless we dispel the view that there is no point in putting one's name down for housing in rural communities, there will be a knock-on effect of no new houses being built.

The Minister for Social Development: The Member rightly refers to the chicken-and-egg situation associated with housing need in rural communities. The same situation often applies to urban communities, too. We are analysing the definition of need to determine how it could be redefined. The Member raised with me the issue of the rural cottages programme in the greater Lurgan area, and I recently wrote to him on foot of his correspondence to me.

As part of the whole debate about the social housing development programme, the Member will be aware that the provision of housing in rural areas is on the list of what I would like to do if I had the money. The dogs in the street know that housing faces a financial shortfall. If Mr O'Dowd wants more resources to address housing need in the rural community, he should push the Executive, especially ministerial colleagues in his party, to put housing on a sound financial footing once and for all and to decouple it from the whole debate about capital receipts.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she confirm that the Housing Executive, through some of the housing associations, expressed an interest in the sale of the former police station in Gilford? Will she also indicate in more general terms what level of investment is planned for the Upper Bann area this year and over the next three years?

The Minister for Social Development: I will investigate the case in relation to the site at Gilford and come back to the Member on that. The current programme for the year ending 31 March 2010 contains 11 separate housing schemes. The total number of dwellings is 191, and DSD's potential investment is £16 million.

Of course, not all of those schemes are guaranteed to start this year because a number of reasons could delay their delivery. However, any of the schemes that

cannot be delivered this year will automatically be rolled forward into next year's programme so that, in effect, they will not be lost.

In the next number of weeks, I hope to be able to publish the social housing development programme for the next three years. We have been building, and hope to build this year, more houses than we have ever built in any single year for the past decade. Set against the economic downturn, we are working an economic miracle through the social housing development programme.

Mr Savage: How many applicants are on the Housing Executive waiting list in the Banbridge area, and how many of those cases are related to housing stress?

The Minister for Social Development: I do not have that information to hand, but I assure the Member that I will check that out later today and write to him. The most important action is to secure the necessary resources to accommodate the housing needs, particularly the social housing needs, of all the people of Northern Ireland. Once and for all, we want to put the social housing programme on a sound financial footing and decouple it from capital receipts. I will come back to Mr Savage in writing on the figures for Banbridge.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 5 and 6 have been withdrawn. The Members who were to ask questions 7 and 8 are not in their places. Question 9 has been withdrawn. The Members who were to ask questions 10 and 11 are not in their places. I call Mr McClarty. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McClarty: I suppose it would be an anticlimax if I say that I have forgotten what I was going to have to say — question number 12. *[Laughter.]*

Fuel Poverty

12. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Social Development what steps her Department has taken to help people suffering from fuel poverty during the recent prolonged cold spell. (AQO 572/10)

The Minister for Social Development: In addition to the winter fuel payments that are paid to people who are aged 60 or over at a rate of £250 and to people who are aged 80 or over at a rate of £400, my Department has, to date, made arrangements to issue three separate cold weather payments of £25 each to all qualifying customers, regardless of age. In total, approximately 166,000 people will benefit from the cold weather payment scheme.

As well as providing heating and insulation measures, the warm homes scheme provides advice on maximising household income by ensuring that

vulnerable people are claiming all the benefits to which they are entitled. For the first time, working tax credit is a qualifying benefit for both heating and insulation measures, and the over-60 age restriction for heating measures has been removed. More than £118 million has been spent on making in excess of 71,000 households warmer. I have no doubt that all Members will agree that that has provided magnificent help to people throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for her response and for all the work that she has done over recent weeks to help people to cover the extra cost of their heating to keep their homes warm. Will she advise the House whether geographical areas determine the conditions for who qualifies for the allowance?

The Minister for Social Development: There are several geographical areas, which are dictated by the local meteorological stations, of which there are around seven in Northern Ireland. The extreme nature of the cold weather conditions in the past three weeks has meant that every meteorological station in Northern Ireland triggered the need for the cold weather payment because temperatures were at or below 0°C for seven consecutive days. Therefore, there was no difference to the payment geographically in Northern Ireland. However, there might be a difference this week, because I am led to believe that snow is falling in certain areas.

3.30 pm

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

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill

Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Second Stage of the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill [NIA 5/09] be agreed. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]*

Mr Ford: It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and to welcome the Second Stage of the Bill. I want to talk about three key areas that the Minister of the Environment mentioned in his introduction: the biodiversity duty; the updating of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985; and the updating of the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002, as far as it relates to areas of special scientific interest (ASSIs) — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. If Members wish to carry on private conversations, they must do so outside the confines of the Chamber.

Mr Ford: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was frightened that the Minister might miss my pearls of wisdom, and his officials are seated even further away.

The development of a duty to promote the biodiversity strategy must be welcomed as an obligation on all public bodies. Although the Bill spells out certain aspects of that, it is unclear how the overarching strategy will be carried through into a specific programme and, indeed, what efforts will be made by the Department or others to ensure that all public bodies live up to their obligations in that respect. Although that is welcome as a basic introduction, I am not sure that the Bill goes as far as equivalent legislation in other UK jurisdictions. We may wish to visit the precise detail of that point as we go through the Bill.

The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, which is clearly 25 years out of date, is in serious need of updating. There is an issue of principle relating to the schedules, in which different species are listed, about whether there should be a mechanism for updating by Order rather than primary legislation being required to make every necessary amendment. The Minister referred to a re-examination of the legislation every five years, but surely he does not expect the Assembly to seek primary legislation every five years to deal with that issue. However, we are currently stuck with that mechanism.

Departmental officials told the Committee for the Environment that the Minister was considering a total ban on snares as opposed to the detailed proposals, over a number of clauses, which relate to regulations on the use of snares. The Minister's current proposals to continue to allow snares do not address significant disquiet among people who are concerned with environmental matters. If, as is the case, we are told that it is merely the representation of the Ulster Farmers' Union's concerns about foxes at lambing time, many people will not believe that to be an adequate excuse for allowing the continued use of snares all year round, given the effect that snares can have on a number of species, whether or not they are the designated targets, and on domestic animals.

There will be robust discussion about whether an overall ban might be more appropriate. If there is an argument that is solely concerned with foxes at lambing season, primary legislation might be required to spell that out to ensure that snares are not used on other species and at times other than the springtime, when there may be concern. We look forward to seeing some way to address the current indiscriminate use of snares with all the accompanying animal welfare concerns.

It is positive that the proposals to update the schedules refer to the golden eagle being included. That will be of major interest to Members such as my friend Jim Wells, who is probably one of the few Members who has seen golden eagles nesting in County Donegal. It is, however, surprising that the golden eagle will be included but that protection is not being offered to the red kite, whether through a specific programme to reintroduce it to Northern Ireland or through the hoped-for movement of eagles from Donegal to Northern Ireland. Other raptors are similarly in need of protection. Therefore, although I suspect that the principle in the Bill is correct, others species may need to be considered.

The RSPB, among others, has noted a number of species of wader that it believes need increased protection, specifically curlews, lapwings and redshanks, all of which are in major difficulties compared with their position a few years ago. That is why it is necessary to look at a way to update the schedules without requiring primary legislation. It will be interesting to hear from the Minister whether he sees that as a possibility or benefit.

I noted with interest and significant concern that the Minister repeated arguments made by his predecessor in the first Assembly, Mr Sam Foster, about not doing anything to enhance the protection of the Irish hare, even though he spoke about the specific needs of the Irish hare and the species action plan being up for revision this year.

In one of the last acts of the Assembly in its first guise, an amendment was passed, against the wishes of the Environment Minister, to the Game Preservation (Amendment) Bill that was before the House. That amendment sought to enhance the protection of the Irish hare, if only on a temporary basis. That clearly showed a strong wish in this Chamber that the Irish hare should be granted higher protection than it receives at present and that there must be a real need to see that it is moved to schedule 5. It is utterly lacking in logic that one of the few species for which there is a specific species action plan is not granted the full protection of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, and it is again not proposed to enhance that protection. We tested this issue before on a limited basis under the game preservation legislation. The Minister will need to heed evidence that will undoubtedly come in from a range of environmental and conservation organisations and heed the wishes of the House. Unfortunately, I did not have time to check the voting records at the Further Consideration Stage of that Bill in 2001. It may even have been the case that a then DUP Back-Bencher, Mr Poots, was in the substantial majority that sought to enhance the protection of the Irish hare on that occasion. I will look up the Hansard report with interest to see how Members voted when they had the opportunity to enhance protection for the hare.

Hares are most at risk as a result of habitat destruction, and the Minister is right to highlight that. However, it is also entirely reasonable to recognise that illegal coursing and other sorts of trapping and hunting are also relevant and justify the fullest protection for hares. In that context, it is good that the Bill proposes significant enhancements to the enforcement powers that would be used against those who would engage in wildlife crime and to ensure that legislation does not permit loopholes to allow people to escape prosecution.

I am concerned that the amendments proposed to the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002, which replaced three Bills that were before the Assembly when it was suspended, provide for only limited improvements to the management of ASSIs and to the duties of public bodies. Other ASSI issues need to be addressed. The Order that went through Westminster was less than satisfactory and would not have met the requirements and wishes of the Committee that was considering that Bill at the time of suspension.

This is the opportunity to enhance the protection of ASSIs significantly, not merely to make some modest changes to the duties of public bodies. The Committee and the House will have to consider seriously the question of amendments to strengthen those powers, since it is unlikely that we will get any further opportunity to deal with the matter in the coming years. Those

powers must be strengthened in order to have the highest possible standards of maintenance of ASSIs.

It is also a matter of regret that tree preservation orders, which were tied into the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002, have been ignored completely at this stage, even though they would fall entirely within the principles of the Bill and even though it was the wish of the Environment Committee to address the issue on that occasion. I remind the Minister that William McCrea and I sought to make a significant enhancement to what the Department was proposing under the tree preservation legislation. William McCrea is a party colleague of the Minister's and a constituency colleague of mine, and he was the Chairperson of the Environment Committee at that time. If that enhancement could be seen to be within the remit of the Bill, it may also have to be considered. However, that is a slightly technical point at this stage.

On behalf of my colleagues, I welcome the introduction of the Bill as a first step. However, considerable work is still to be done to make it the best possible Bill.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton): If any Member is as bewildered as I am as to why the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee is speaking on wildlife issues, I will do my best to explain in the next few moments.

Given the Minister's comments and those of the Chairperson of the Environment Committee, the House is aware already that the Department of the Environment is responsible for the game laws in Northern Ireland. Those laws regulate the taking, killing and selling of game, and they provide for the prevention of poaching. However, the game licensing system is administered in Northern Ireland by the Department for Social Development under the Miscellaneous Transferred Excise Duties Act (Northern Ireland) 1972. Persons wishing to kill or deal in game require a licence, and, in the latter case, they require a certificate from a Magistrate's Court. It is understood that, in August 2007, DEFRA abolished its licensing system for killing game or dealing in game in England and Wales. It was considered that the game licence no longer served a useful purpose, and, given today's comprehensive food standards and the legislation that covers the hygiene aspects of game, there was no justification for requiring retailers to hold a game dealer's licence.

At its meeting on 4 October 2007, the Committee for Social Development considered the proposal from the Minister for Social Development to abolish the existing game licensing system in Northern Ireland. The Committee was content for the Department of the Environment to consult on Minister Ritchie's proposal,

but it agreed to consider the matter further when the result of the public consultation became known. Following that consultation, responses to which were generally favourable, the Committee agreed on 18 May 2009 that it had no objection to the Minister's intention to make legislative provision for the abolition of the game licensing system in Northern Ireland.

To summarise, the Committee has no objections to the provisions in the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill, specifically those at clause 31, which will abolish game licences and game dealers' licenses in Northern Ireland.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I echo what other Members said and stress that it is important that all legislation protecting Irish habitats and wildlife is fit for purpose. This is an opportunity to enhance that protection.

As someone who has seen a basking shark up close — not too close — off the coast of Rathlin Island, I welcome clause 9, which will create a new offence by prohibiting anyone from intentionally or recklessly disturbing a basking shark. Basking sharks are an important element of the marine environment off the north coast of Antrim.

As my colleague Cathal Boylan outlined, Sinn Féin notes proposals to strengthen legislation on snares. Indeed, I raised that issue with the Minister only a couple of months ago. My party believes that snares should be outlawed altogether, and I look forward to deliberating on clause 10 during the Bill's Committee Stage. Some groups may foresee difficulties in enforcing the proposals in that clause, so it will be important to address those concerns. I welcome the comments that Members from other parties made about snaring.

The negative animal welfare impact of snaring far outweighs any argument to retain snares as a form of predator control. Snares are indiscriminate and often capture animals that they are not intended for, such as domestic pets, farm animals and protected wild animals. A complete end to the use of snares will end the suffering of animals that are caught but are not the target, and it will be far easier for the Department to enforce.

3.45 pm

We should also take into account the fact that snares capture European-protected species as well as schedule 5 species, the trapping or killing of which is illegal. It is quite clear that there is a lot of work to be done on clause 10, and I look forward to deliberating on that aspect of the Bill in Committee.

Obviously, the Wildlife Order 1985 needs updating. The Committee should also look closely

at the inclusion of certain species in the schedules. An opportunity exists to enhance the protection of birds that are under severe threat, such as the curlew, lapwing and redshank. Other species of bird, such as the peregrine, osprey and red kite, reuse the same nest sites and, as other Members have pointed out, they are at risk if their traditional nests are damaged. Those species should therefore be added to the list of birds whose nests should be protected on a year-round basis. I agree with Chairperson's comments on that issue.

I believe that the public overwhelmingly support the introduction of custodial sentences for those involved in targeting and killing such species of bird, especially given the fact that so much work is being done to build up the population of bird species such as the red kite. Members are correct to say that a lot of the legislation being referred to today is out of date and out of step with public opinion. There is an onus and responsibility on us, as representatives, to update that legislation accordingly.

I look forward to the Bill coming before the Committee for scrutiny. I welcome the opportunity to listen to the views of the many interest groups involved and to further strengthen the Bill, because a degree of work still needs to be done.

Mr Dallat: Most of what needed to be said about the Bill has been said. However, as a nature lover, I am more than happy to repeat it. In fact, if encouraged, I would stay here all day to talk about it. I live in the countryside, and I am in a privileged position, because I can enjoy and appreciate nature at its best. There is nothing more wonderful than taking a stroll to experience nature as it was intended and to soak up its wonders.

I live in Gortmacrane, which means the stony field, and there is a paradise very close to me, where I can go to appreciate the Foxy at any time. However, I have to admit that he stole my neighbour's gander recently, but that is nature. All wildlife co-exists. *[Interruption.]* I could also say that his partner went off laying eggs.

The Bill is very welcome and has my full-hearted support, and I hope that the enforcing legislation is capable of delivering what is enshrined in the Bill. I am conscious that, to our shame, cockfighting, badger-baiting and other terrible things still take place in this country and that we have not been able to stamp them out.

The Bill also refers to ASSIs. Mr Deputy Speaker, you will fully appreciate why I want to focus on that. There are proposals to develop up to four super-dumps near an area of special scientific interest in the constituency that we share. We must be serious about how we approach ASSIs in future, and government should be embarrassed by the proposals to try to mix areas of scientific interest with super-dumps.

Members have already referred to snares. One of my lasting childhood memories is of finding a fox that had died from loss of blood, exhaustion or hunger. The poor animal was also missing a foot, which indicated that it had eaten it to try to escape from the snare. I hope that grotesque devices of that kind are a thing of the past.

I have sympathy for farmers, because I know from experience that Foxy, who I referred to earlier, is a problem. I say only that surely there are more humane ways of dealing with wild animals that have gone looking for the farmer's flock.

Several Members referred to the Irish hare, and I am delighted to share with the Assembly my experience during the recent snow. While other people were perhaps experiencing difficulties getting from A to B, I was out walking my dog when two of the most beautiful Irish hares skipped across the road. That is the first time that I have seen the animal for several years. There is every reason to make sure that the statutory rule which applies at the moment continues, and I encourage the Minister to make it permanent.

The Bill makes it very clear that ignorance of the law cannot be a justification in the future, and that includes the matter of custodial sentences. However, I point out that those acts which are already illegal have resulted in very few people, if any, being put in jail for cruelty to animals. Therefore, we have to seriously consider how we can get the message across to people who do not appreciate the wonders of nature about what they are doing.

I believe that, although the Bill makes certain acts illegal, there has to be a carrot as well. I am very conscious that there are children living in more urban areas who would not even recognise domestic animals, such as cows or pigs, because they have never seen them. How much more difficult it is to get across the wonders of wildlife to the many people who never have the opportunity that I have to see them. The school curriculum should be enhanced to ensure that education on this subject is more than just nature walks and that it gives every child an appreciation of the wonderful planet that we live on.

We are not yet at the stage where good overcomes evil. For that reason, enforcement is necessary, and I fully support it.

When I go home this evening and take Ralph for a walk, I can be certain that, all around me, there are foxes, badgers, pigeons and pheasants, all surviving in woodland that has been protected not by government but by farmers who, as custodians of the countryside, appreciate how important they are. Those farmers are the best bastions to ensure that the Bill delivers what it promises. The Bill is a beacon of light and is very important. In what are difficult times in the Assembly,

we can today celebrate legislation that will genuinely protect the environment, the countryside and biodiversity.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Jim Shannon.

Mr Dallat: Do not spoil it, Jim.

Mr Shannon: I have been very keen to speak on the Bill, and I apologise for all my toing and froing in and out of the Chamber. The Agriculture Committee was meeting this afternoon and, as there were votes to be taken, I had to make sure that I was there.

As Members are probably aware, the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill is close to my heart. My reasons for saying that may be different from those of other Members: there is nothing so tasty as duck à l'orange or a well cooked pheasant.

I declare an interest as a member of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) and a member of the Countryside Alliance. I am unashamedly a countryside sportsman when time allows. Therefore, I have looked at the Bill with great interest.

I look forward to the opportunity to speak to the Bill, especially those clauses relating to shooting sports and conservation. There is nothing wrong with being a sportsman in the shooting fraternity and a conservationist. The people who make the biggest contribution to conservation are those in the shooting community, not those in the so-called green lobby, some of whom sit in the Chamber.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Shannon: The Member will get his chance to speak.

In general, the Bill is well balanced and well thought-out. However, there are always controversial aspects of a Bill, and it is to those that I wish to speak. There is no time limit on my contribution, but I will not take too long.

I have corresponded with both the BASC and the Countryside Alliance, gone through the proposals with them and gauged their opinions. Those organisations make a significant and important contribution to the countryside, and, through the actions of their members, ensure that conservation measures are carried out. I am representing the shooting community through my comments.

I want to go through the issues clause by clause and hope that everyone will bear with me. According to the explanatory and financial memorandum, clause 1 imposes:

“a new statutory duty upon government departments and public bodies to take action to further the conservation of biodiversity.”

In the main, that should be welcomed, but the shooting community is well placed to assist with initiatives to achieve that objective. In other words, why not have

the shooting organisations more involved in the policies that are brought forward? I ask the Minister to comment on that in his response. The shooting community acts naturally to conserve and enhance the habitat of animals and ensure that species are not overhunted.

I will comment on my experience from my own land in Greyabbey. The land is actually in the hands of my father, but he is very good and lets me do things on it; the handover will come through time. We planted 3,000 trees on the land and made sure that there were two ponds, which were examples of direct conservation to enhance the habitat. We also made sure that the hedgerows were wide enough, which not only accommodates the bird life that Mr Dallat talked about but also the flora and insect life, which are important to the natural biodiversity of the countryside. Those are direct and practical actions that show that the shooting community does what it says it does. The shooting community does what it says on the tin. It has produced the goods on habitats and conservation, which have enhanced wildlife in the countryside. I would like to know how many Members do their bit to enhance wildlife. We will hear about that in a few minutes when the green lobby speaks.

One note of caution is the possibility that, in attempting to meet their obligations, Departments and public bodies may be overzealous and create bureaucracy and obstacles that could impede sporting activities. For example, the Forest Service offers sporting leases. However, rather than simply entitling the leaseholder to shoot any legal quarry species, as laid out in the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, the Forest Service has its own restrictions, such as a prohibition on the shooting of teal. The Forest Service says that it is not liable to charge for permitting the shooting of species on the amber or red lists. That is understandable, and I can go with it. However, the provision is unnecessary, because the Forest Service could simply demand compliance with the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 from their lessees, which would offer it the required protection. It is possible that the new statutory provision could lead to similar over-reactions elsewhere. I urge the Committee to safeguard against that at the Bill's Committee Stage. In other words, if the Forest Service is given power, make sure that it uses it correctly and wisely.

The provisions in clause 10, which concerns snares, are acceptable. Moreover, it is welcome that the guidance notes reiterate that snares are an important means of controlling pest species. Let us not be against the use of snares; it is important that they are available. With regard to the catching of foxes, in order to control their blood sports, we must make sure that they, as members of a pest species, are controlled.

4.00pm

Clause 12 deals with the introduction of new species. The deliberate release of muntjac deer by shooters is becoming an increasingly frequent, but almost hysterically reported, issue. All responsible shooting organisations and individuals totally condemn such releases, and I reiterate that it is not normal practice in country sports. However, it is good that the clause addresses the issue.

I welcome clauses 15 and 16. Clause 15 allows the shooting of deer from a parked vehicle, and clause 16 allows some deer management, but only under licence, during the close season. Such licences are not available without good cause. People are not being given a blanket licence to control, but they will make the conditions when they are favourable.

Mr Wells: The honourable Member raised the issue of Reeves's muntjac; I am sure that every Member is aware of it. It is a small species of deer that has caused enormous damage, particularly in England. It has destroyed woodlands and has had a huge economic impact. Does the Member accept that the fact that it has been discovered in Northern Ireland is extremely worrying? Furthermore, will he join with me and urge the Minister to take urgent action to capture and remove specimens of the species in Northern Ireland? If we do not do so and the population increases, foresters and farmers will suffer huge economic losses. That is to the detriment of all wildlife in Northern Ireland.

Mr Shannon: I am astounded that we agree on something. *[Laughter.]* I agree with the Member 100%; the introduction of muntjac deer will have clear detrimental effects on people who manage forests. I will leave the decision on the method of controlling those deer to the people who know best. They may capture them, put them in a wee van and take them away somewhere, or they may turn them into a meal.

There is a good provision on the use of licences in the close season, and it rebuts some deer managers' attempts to legalise night shooting. We must have some controls and understanding of how best to manage wildlife that has many negative elements. At night, calves could be wounded, lost or orphaned, and we want to ensure that that does not happen.

Clause 26 has the effect of extending the season for shooting female deer — that is, the red deer, the sika deer and the fallow deer — by starting a month earlier but continuing to the end of February. I welcome that provision, which has many positive elements. That clause will allow more flexible deer management in response to weather conditions, and so on, so that the cull can be managed without the need for night shooting. It could still happen even if the weather is bad in February.

However, among all the many positives, I must point out a clause that is of major concern. Clause 28 requires the owners of land in an ASSI to notify the Department of changes of ownership or occupation. That is an important issue because it is how the system carries out the management of firearms, whether that be shotguns or rifles. There are two main causes of concern. Under the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 2004, the term "occupier" is relied upon to permit a person to borrow a shotgun from the occupier, and there is a parallel for rifle loan. However, the term "occupier" is not defined in the legislation.

The prospect of the Department of the Environment being responsible for maintaining a register of occupiers means that the PSNI could rely on such a list to determine the legality of firearms loans. The list could not be used for that purpose, because the PSNI would have the list of occupiers, which can change. However, the legislation does not define the meaning of "occupier" and, therefore, major unintended difficulties could be caused. It is important that we ask the Department and its officials to address any difficulties that are highlighted. Is the occupier the person who takes the grazing in conacre, the person who leases the sporting rights or the person who has rented the land for other purposes? For example, the BASC holds a game fair in Ballywalter every year. Others are held across the Province at Shane's Castle in Antrim, in Moira and in the Minister's own constituency.

I am concerned that DOE is not staffed to deal with the matter. The requirement to notify is new, and given the target of listing large swathes of Northern Ireland as ASSIs, there is every prospect that the Department will fail miserably in keeping up with the processing.

I suggest to the Minister and his officials that it would be more sensible and practical for those arrangements to be maintained by Land Registry, because it is responsible for keeping records of ownership changes and could much more easily manage the occupier register.

Mr Weir: I take the Member's point that the definition of an occupier should be clarified. I presume that one reason why the term "occupier" is used is to prevent a situation in which people might try to use a loophole in order to deny that they are the owner. A person who is a leaseholder of land does not own that land, and the term "occupier" can be used to cover that. The definition must be clarified, but there may be a concern that simply dropping the term "occupier" could lead to a situation in which people frustrate the intention of the definition. Genuine people might be caught out while those who subvert the legislation can avoid the proper restrictions.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention. He has underlined the issue clearly. It is important to note that names of occupiers, landowners and leaseholders could be more easily maintained in an occupier register. That could be done more helpfully by Land Registry.

There are other smaller issues that need to be tidied up, such as the intent of clause 29. The DOE has a target of declaring 8% of Northern Ireland's countryside as ASSIs, and the Minister will respond on that issue. The prospect of a forest of signage to declare the special status of such land will risk spoiling the very land that it is designed for. The land is lovely, and is great to walk through and enjoy, but there must be balance when it comes to signage, for which a checking system must be put in place.

I welcome clause 31, which deals with the abolition of game licences and game dealers' licences. The requirement for a licence to shoot or deal in game has been abolished in England and Wales, and it is not before time that we should follow that lead in Northern Ireland. Such licences serve no useful purpose, and clause 31 provides a welcome revision. I thank the Minister for his comments on that issue.

Clause 32 deals with the sale of game. The scrapping of the restriction on selling game out of season, provided that it has been lawfully taken, is sensible and welcome. We would have liked to make two changes to the provisions for shooting opportunity. The first is the unification of wildfowling seasons with the rest of the United Kingdom, which would allow the extension of shooting of wildfowl on the foreshore until 20 February. Perhaps the Minister and his officials could respond to that. That would not affect Lough Neagh or Lough Erne, but it would benefit Strangford Lough, which is in the area that I represent, Larne lough, Lough Foyle, Dundrum inner bay and Carlingford lough.

The second change concerns moonlight shooting. We accept and understand that that has not been universally sought, but nonetheless, it could have been considered in the proposals for the Bill to bring it into line with the rest of the United Kingdom. I have been assured by country sports organisations that although curlew are still on the quarry schedules, there will be continued promotion of the widely observed voluntary moratorium to demonstrate that self-regulation is much better than diktat. How true that is.

Mr Wells: If the Member is saying that a voluntary ban exists, what could possibly be wrong in making it statutory? As we return to normality, more tourists will come and avail themselves of shooting opportunities. Surely, for clarity, there is nothing wrong with imposing a legal ban on the shooting of curlew given the dramatic decline in the population of that species,

not as a result of shooting activity, but of habitat change, particularly drainage. Let us have clarity and put all those wader species into schedule 1 to the Bill so that people know exactly where they stand.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention, but he will appreciate that I have a different opinion. We will have to agree to differ. To be fair to the Member, he said that the decline in the numbers of curlew was not caused by shooting. People in shooting organisations and conservation bodies are making a contribution.

For many years, I have considered self-regulation, as it was referred to earlier, as preferable to diktats, because shooters are not the problem. The decline in numbers is down to the loss of habitat. I shot curlew, albeit many years ago, and it was extremely tasty. Were it still on the menu, Jim, I would make sure that you had some with your potatoes tomorrow morning.

It is disappointing that the Bill contains no explicit provision to legalise the sale of dead mallard. They should be included in schedule 3, along with wood pigeon, to enable their sale to be approved by subsequent licence. I was informed that the DOE was receptive to that argument and considered that it could be approved without changing the Order. The time to address that issue is now. The intention of such a provision is to allow estates to sell their duck, a practice that is currently illegal. There is no intention of allowing truly wild mallard to be shot and sold for profit, but to enable those that are harvested on land where birds are reared and released to be shot for sale into the food chain.

We must ensure that the Irish hare remains on the quarry list —

Mr Boylan: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Shannon: I must be allowed to make my statement, as I am sure other Members will when the time comes. The Irish hare should remain on the quarry list. The all-Ireland species action plan for the Irish hare will end in 2010, and if the hare population cycle is normal, its target will be achieved. As Members are aware, the hare population grows and decreases in cycles. The current situation is that the number of hares in the Province has risen dramatically.

Mr Wells: As the Member's time is not limited, I am not cutting into the five or 10 minutes that he would normally have.

One of the reasons why many Members support the total protection of the Irish hare is that they want to abolish the barbaric practice of hare coursing for ever. Does the Member stand over letting a hare loose in an enclosed place and allowing two greyhounds to terrorise it by chasing it for the benefit of spectators who bet on its fate? Morally, is he able to stand over that?

Do the shooting profession and those involved in country sports, who are generally responsible people, not understand that if they continue to support that practice, they will bring field sports in Northern Ireland into disrepute? Few people in the Province understand how anyone could regard hare coursing as a sport.

Mr Shannon: It is not a sport that I have followed, but the hare population has grown dramatically. That growth is down to shooting and the conservation values of such organisations, as well as to changing farming practices and habitat management. To cite an example, for the past 20 years, the hares on our farm have not been touched, and, over the past year, we have seen about four hares on the farm. However, during the summer, as the barley crop was growing, I noticed something at the top of one of the fields that looked like a bunch of black crows, but it was not. The four hares had bred, and they had their leverets with them, making a total of a dozen hares in that field. The increase in the hare population is, therefore, down to the many people like me who carry out habitat control.

Mr Wells: And then you kill them.

Mr Shannon: No, I have not. The farming practices and habitat management that we carry out have been positive and constructive.

Mr Wells: And then you killed them.

Mr Shannon: No, I have not, and I ask the Minister to consider my argument.

The Bill is, on the whole, worthy of support. I have asked the Minister and his officials to consider only a few issues, and I also ask the Committee to take those into consideration when the time comes. I thank Members for giving me the opportunity to make my comments. I put on record that I will support the Minister and his Bill.

We may be different in this world, Jim, but we can still be friends. I will still be your friend; I hope that you will still be mine.

Mr Deputy Speaker: After duck a l'orange was mentioned, I was not sure whether I had called Jim Shannon or Jamie Oliver to speak.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the basis of the Bill and many of its provisions, which will increase the level of protection given to the habitats of many endangered animals.

Clause 1 places a duty on public bodies to preserve biodiversity. A key method of delivering that will be the planning process, whether through decisions made by the Planning Service or, in future, local government.

4.15 pm

Why is biodiversity so important? I am sure that some people think that protecting our environment is

unimportant. However, it is important that we protect our fragile environment for future generations. The endangerment of habitats is a strong sign that something is going wrong in the local area. It is often the result of certain pollutants being released into the environment, and it could have a long-term effect on future generations.

Recently, I was struck by two Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) local management area information leaflets, one for the Six Mile Water and one for Lough Neagh. The former deemed that 83% of the surface water in the Six Mile Water was less than good, owing to suppressed invertebrate populations and diatoms. The NIEA classed 100% of the surface water in Lough Neagh as being less than good. Surface water quality is affecting life at the bottom of the food chain, but we must remember that Lough Neagh is the source of water for much of the Northern Ireland population. We would feel much more protected if we were assured that the water that goes into Lough Neagh was of a much higher standard.

In creating an increased duty to preserve biodiversity, it will be incumbent on public bodies to recognise that changes can occur, provided that mitigation actions are taken to enhance the local environment. As a local councillor, I came across the owner of a fishery who was applying for permission to expand his lake. The Planning Service recommended that the application be refused. When we got to the bottom of the matter, we realised that the Planning Service's opposition was based on the then Environment and Heritage Service officer's concerns that the work would endanger habitats. However, the planning application provided for extensive replanting and groundwork, which, it was acknowledged, would enhance the environment.

Until the officer was forced to answer the question of how long it would take the habitat to recover — his reply was that it would take two years — he held out against the planning application. Planners will have to be reasonable and understand that change can occur when appropriate mitigation action is taken. As we progress the legislation, it is important that there be a clear understanding that it will not be used to prevent all new development. New development must be permitted, but appropriate mitigation action must be taken. Officials must take care in exercising the powers that will be given to them to ensure that they take balanced decisions.

I welcome the redaction of Crown immunity in certain articles in the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. The protection of birds and wildlife should and must extend to the state as it does to the citizen. I am not aware of any reason why Crown immunity should continue to exist in that area.

I am also curious about clause 20, which relates to wildlife inspectors. It would be helpful if the Minister or his Department confirmed that, although the clause creates the term “wildlife inspector”, they have existed for some time. The 1985 Order includes provision for an “authorised person” who appears to have exercised those types of powers in the past.

Inspectors undoubtedly require powers of entry. However, when someone other than a police officer exercises those powers, appropriate controls must be in place so that they are not granted inappropriate access. The grounds for entry must be reasonable. It would be useful to have information on specific instances in which that type of power has inhibited the protection of the environment and wildlife. That would give me and, indeed, the public a better understanding of the powers that will be granted. However, I understand how there could be a problem if there are barriers to gaining appropriate evidence.

I understand that, at present, wildlife crime is largely handed over at an early stage to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. The provision in the Bill appears to move towards greater intervention directly by the Department. Granting powers to any organisation other than the police must be done carefully and appropriately. As I said earlier, scrutiny mechanisms must be in place to justify the action. I am also interested to know what long-term plans there may be in that area. Is the plan to move the responsibility to local government in the future? I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council.

I welcome the extra provision in the Bill to protect areas of special scientific interest. If we are serious about protecting those special areas, there clearly must be increased powers of protection. It is important that the Department has the full information about who owns or uses the land. I hope that that information will be used to help to educate the owners. Perhaps carrots will be provided as well as a stick; perhaps grant assistance will be made available to enable improvements to those areas and the duty of advising who the owner is will be used in a positive manner and not just when breaches occur.

I hope, too, that the Department will use as light a touch as possible, particularly in the early stages, when new ASSIs are designated. There is a need to educate the owners. It is important that we take the public with us, rather than coming down with a heavy hammer, because that could create problems. It is much better, through education, to take the public with us. That would mean that nobody could have the excuse of not knowing what they were meant to do. It is appropriate that the information is passed and that the Department should educate landowners about their responsibilities.

I will talk briefly about snares. It would be helpful if information was provided on what discussions, if any, there have been with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. I declare an interest because I own some farmland and I assist my father on the parental farm, although I am not involved in snaring. However, as a primary school child, I remember going out to feed hens in a small hen house, and every single hen had been killed because a fox had been able to get in. The fox did not simply take a meal; it killed everything and left. There are pests in the countryside, and there needs to be a legitimate means of controlling those pests.

Mr Wells: I accept the Member’s point that there are instances when pests such as foxes and rabbits need to be controlled. Does he accept that research has shown that 48% of the animals that are killed by snares are neither foxes nor rabbits and that 17% are domestic pets? The problem with snaring is that it is totally indiscriminate. There are other ways of controlling those pest species without killing other species that are either protected or are not targets.

Mr Beggs: I accept fully that the continuing provision of snares is questionable. No one has given me information that indicates why snaring should continue. I look forward to receiving information in the course of the Bill’s Committee Stage. If snaring were allowed to continue, it would be important that it is regulated heavily and policed. No reasonable person would wish for cruelty. I heard of a horrendous instance in which a fox bit off its leg because it was trapped for a considerable time. I wish that there were a better method of controlling pests. If such a method exists, the Bill should give consideration to banning snares. However, I wish to be advised of how else pests could be controlled.

As I said, we must bear in mind that foxes can indiscriminately kill every bird in a hen house and snatch lambs, particularly in the early stages of their lives, so failing to appropriately control pests will cause other animals to suffer. A balance is required. Nevertheless, I am open to the thought of banning snares. I am not aware of anyone who uses them in my rural community, although the practice may occur to a greater or lesser extent in other parts of Northern Ireland.

The Bill will update existing provisions and introduce six new offences, so it would be helpful if the Minister and the Department would comment on the enforceability of the existing offences cited in the Wildlife (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. Bearing in mind that we are creating additional offences, how effectively have the existing provisions been implemented? When creating laws, it is important that they can be regulated and their aims achieved, so it would be useful to know how many convictions have been secured under the Order in the past few years.

Clause 7 limits the defences that are available in relation to a specific offence. However, once again, how well has that provision been enforced? I appreciate that I am posing many questions; however, as a member of the Committee for the Environment, I look forward to receiving the relevant information after the debate. The purpose of scrutiny is to ask questions and receive information. I also hope that those who are interested in this subject will take part in the Bill's Committee Stage and provide the Committee with information, so that we are well informed about any decisions that we might make. I look forward to participating in the Committee Stage to improve the legislation, which will enhance Northern Ireland's wildlife and biodiversity.

Mr Wells: I shall declare my interests in this matter. I am a former employee of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and a former employee of the National Trust. Indeed, I am a member of the National Trust pension scheme: a point that is relevant to the debate. I am also chairman of the Northern Ireland Raptor Study Group, of which I have been a member since 1991. The group consists of bird of prey enthusiasts who seek to promote understanding and to protect species such as the peregrine falcon, merlin, sparrowhawk and, more recently, the red kite.

Not only have I been involved with wildlife in the voluntary sector, but I had the privilege of sitting in the Assembly in 1983 and 1984, during the scrutiny stages of what became the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 and the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. I remember spending many months going through and refining that legislation, which has been in place for 25 years, and the Bill that we are considering is an upgrade of those laws. That makes me feel extremely old.

Like many Members, I believe that the proposed legislation is fundamentally sound. It is a refinement of various Acts and Orders, which brings the legislation up to date. The fact that the debate has honed in on three or four specific issues indicates that the Department has generally got things right. However, there are a small number of issues with which we still have to deal.

Northern Ireland wildlife is under enormous pressure, largely due to the trend towards agricultural intensification that occurred after the war and, latterly, due to EEC grants. I am glad to say that there have been major changes. The tide in agriculture has turned away from food production for its own sake to more environmentally sensitive farming. The environmentally sensitive areas scheme and the countryside management scheme have had a major impact on habitat loss.

4.30 pm

Furthermore, under cross-compliance regulations for single farm payments, there is now a list of

operations that cannot be carried out without the Department's consent. I asked a question for written answer about that around a year ago, and it is noticeable that the single farm payment regulations have led to a dramatic decrease in hedgerow loss in Northern Ireland. So, instead of a negative approach having been taken — farmers being told not to do something — they are told that we, as a society, will give them single farm payments totalling £210 million a year to provide a basic level of income to sustain farmers and their families on the land. However, in return for that we expect various environmental standards to be met.

Generally, the news on that looks fairly good. Farmers have reacted well to that incentive and are beginning to protect habitats. Therefore, driving down the road in the middle of May, one no longer sees hundreds of yards of hedgerow being removed or moorland being grubbed up. So, things are going well.

Mr Shannon: The countryside management scheme is an example of how the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development encourages local farmers to provide habitats, retain hedgerows, and increase the flora and the insect life. Does the Member believe that the Department should do more to enhance that?

Mr Wells: When it comes to the opening up of the countryside management scheme, my constituents' complaint is not about its existence; it is that they cannot get into it. Far more people are applying to get into CMS than there are funds available for them to join. Under the renegotiation of the CAP in 2013, I would like to think that we will move to a situation in which single farm payments have been amended, so that everyone can enter the countryside management scheme. In that sense, things are moving in the right direction, but an enormous amount of damage was done before that tide turned.

Our countryside is also under the most enormous development pressure. Until recently, four times more bungalows — single dwellings — were being built in Northern Ireland than in all of the rest of the United Kingdom put together. Driving through the countryside, one cannot help but see the huge urbanisation that has been occurring, with the resultant disturbance and habitat loss. All is not well with our wildlife or our countryside; therefore, the legislation should be brought up to date to deal with those pressures.

Mrs D Kelly: Has the member ever availed himself of the opportunity to have a look at the National Archives of Ireland website, which shows the population of Ireland in the 1911 census, prior to partition? It is quite interesting to note that, in many areas that I have looked at to date, the number of dwellings then was significantly higher than it is currently.

Mr Wells: As a member of the party for urbanisation of the countryside, I was expecting that remark from the honourable Member for Upper Bann. I do have the answer to that question, Mrs Kelly.

No one is going to tell me that the tiny, one-bedroom crofts and cottages that were built in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, that were made from natural materials, that assimilated into the landscape and were surrounded by trees, and in which entire families were reared, had the same impact on the environment as the haciendas that I see around south Down. I know of one such dwelling that measures 4,500 sq ft, has nine bedrooms, three garages, a stuffed eagle on the pillar, and it is inhabited by one person and her dog. That is becoming very common in south Down. Such people are not rural dwellers wishing to live in the countryside; they are urbanites coming into the countryside to make a big statement.

Thus, there is pressure on the countryside. Of course, there is the problem of septic tanks and the road infrastructure that must be built to service the continuous urbanisation. However, I would not have expected Mrs Kelly's party to have spotted that the countryside is under pressure. I am just glad that her party never got the ministerial portfolio for the environment.

The countryside is under pressure. Damage has been done and strong legislation is required. There has been an exchange in the debate with the honourable Member for Strangford Mr Shannon about one impact, which is the dramatic decline in ground-nesting wader species. Members know the species to which I refer, but, for the sake of the Hansard report, we are talking about snipe, redshank, curlew and lapwing.

In 1987, I was employed by the RSPB, along with other staff, to carry out a breeding wader survey in Northern Ireland. Even then, it was apparent that there had been a dramatic decline in our breeding waders. That survey was followed up on several occasions, and the results are extremely worrying. Wader species in Northern Ireland, outside protected areas, are faring extremely badly.

Some of it is due to drainage, some of it is due to intensification of agriculture, some of it is due to disturbance, and some of it is due to predation. However, there is no doubt that species such as curlew and snipe in Northern Ireland are in deep trouble, and the numbers of redshank breeding are pitifully small. Therefore, there can be no excuse for the exclusion of those species from schedule 1 to the Bill.

I accept Mr Shannon's point, which is deeply worrying. I find myself agreeing with several of Mr Shannon's earlier points, which is a matter of deep concern to me. I was thinking to myself, where have I gone wrong that I am agreeing with Jim Shannon on

anything to do with the countryside? But I did. He made some valid points, which, no doubt, will look good in next week's 'Newtownards Chronicle', where people can always read them if they have missed them in the Assembly.

Nevertheless, on a serious note, I listened to Mr Shannon's point, and he is right. The dramatic decline in breeding waders has not been brought about by shooting. The problem is that the population has decreased to a level where shooting could be the coup de grâce. It could remove the remaining small breeding population of that species. The population has reached a level where protection is absolutely essential, and I plead with the Minister, who I know is an authority on breeding redshank, to add it, curlew and lapwing to schedule 1 to give it full protection.

I hope and pray that those conservation measures will work eventually, and schemes such as the countryside management scheme will lead to an increase in those species so that, one day, they could come back onto the quarry list, because wader species are natural prey. There is no problem about that; the difficulty is that we are getting to a stage now where the population is so small that we cannot afford that luxury.

There are already enough species for Mr Shannon to shoot. There are many species of wildfowl, pigeons, a small number of red grouse and pheasants. It will not lead to any sportsman being confined to his home, but it means that we can protect that very beleaguered species.

I must also declare that, in addition to being chairman of the Northern Ireland raptor study group, I am about to start my thirty-fourth year of a long-term study of the population of the peregrine falcon in Northern Ireland. That makes me feel very old. I started in 1977, and I have been following the fate of the peregrine falcon in Northern Ireland ever since. That leads to a bit of confusion, because, occasionally, I do interviews — shy and retiring shrinking violet that I am — and I am sometimes dragged onto the radio airways to do interviews about political activities, be they about health or an issue in south Down. However, very occasionally, I do the odd interview about wildlife. Indeed, three years ago, I did a television interview about the persecution of birds of prey in the Mourne. Someone saw that interview, recognised me from it, stopped me in the street and said that he really enjoyed the piece that I did. He said that I spoke a lot of sense, unlike that other Jim Wells, the bigot up at Stormont. I had to assure him that the person whom he had seen on television and the alleged bigot up at Stormont were the same person, but he could not grasp that.

It is possible to be a politician and to have an interest outside of politics. How would one make the

majority of Members in the Chamber go silent? Ask them what their interests are outside of politics. I have an interest outside of politics, and that is birds of prey. Members may ask what relevance that has to the legislation before us. The legislation needs to be extended to include nest sites, to give permanent protection to the nest sites of a range of bird of prey species, the obvious one being the peregrine falcon.

So many bird of prey species nest in quarries that a peregrine falcon's nest could be removed through the blasting of a rock face for quarry operations. However, the raptor study group has an excellent relationship with the Quarry Products Association, which is the umbrella body for quarrying. It has a biodiversity officer, and the group has found that quarry owners are extremely co-operative. However, it is still important that we have protection.

We have also reintroduced species. I believe that I was the first British person ever to see golden eagles nesting in Donegal. I went up over the border a few years ago to Glenveagh National Park, and I was the first British subject to see the golden eagles nesting. They reared a single chick that year — 2007. They failed in 2008, but they reared two chicks this year. That sequence may not be correct, but I am sure that it is close. I would welcome an invasion of Irish golden eagles into this part of the United Kingdom.

I would be absolutely delighted if that project took off in Donegal, the population increased, and golden eagles from one part of Ulster moved into this part and nested in north Londonderry or Fermanagh. That would be fantastic news. Even though, at present, the golden eagle is not a breeding species that is native to Northern Ireland, if that population spread occurred, it would be essential for the Department to have the power to provide protection for the species' nest sites. Golden eagles nest on the same ledges year after year.

I am also delighted that the RSPB has decided to reintroduce the red kite into the heart of my constituency in South Down. In the interest of the species' security, I will not reveal the exact location. In 2010, we look forward to the first nesting of red kites in Northern Ireland. That is fantastic news not only for those of us who have an interest in birds of prey, but also for the tourism industry, because the red kite is an extremely attractive species which brings people in from a wide area.

A few years ago, I went to Radnorshire in Wales, where a farmer has diversified by setting up a kite feeding station. On the day that I was there, 300 visitors had paid £3 each to watch the red kites feeding. It is an extremely useful addition to that farmer's income. Kite feeding stations are now quite common throughout the rest of the United Kingdom. I hope that some day, a farmer in south Down can enjoy

the same privilege of a second income as a result of creating that type of tourist attraction. If that success is to be achieved, the Assembly must provide protection for red kites' nest sites in order for their population to grow and flourish.

Therefore, the RSPB's recommendation that protection be increased for nest sites of other species, such as the white-tailed sea eagle, which has recently been seen in north Antrim, is sensible. I suspect that the reason why it is not included in the Bill is that, at the time of its initial drafting, there was no realistic prospect of the red kite, golden eagle or sea eagle nesting in Northern Ireland. I am glad to say that now that is very much on the cards.

Indeed, many Members will welcome the fact that in 2009, despite the presence of Mr Shannon within five or 10 miles of the nest site, marsh harriers nested for the first time in the Strangford constituency and reared two young. That is tremendous.

Mr Shannon: Just for the record, I understand that those birds are protected. I endorse their protection, as do all members of the shooting community. We are happy to see all of those birds of prey. There are some on my land and that of other people. We wholeheartedly support their being there. Remember that.

Mr Wells: I often wonder about Mr Shannon's motivation. Does he want those birds to be protected so that some day he can shoot them, or does he want to protect their interests?

Mr Shannon: I like to see them in flight.

Mr Wells: It is remarkably good news that those species are coming back. I think that we are pushing at an open door on the matter with the Department, which realises that it is no great breach of compromise or principle to add protections for the nest sites of those species.

I want to discuss the vexed issue of introductions. The one area on which Mr Shannon and I — and, indeed, all Members — agree is that the introduction of a non-native species to Northern Ireland or anywhere else in the British Isles inevitably spells disaster. Look at the damage that has been done by the grey squirrel and the mink. Recently, there has been reference to Reeves's muntjac. Of course, the other classic example is the ruddy duck. When those species are introduced to an area, they inevitably cause commercial and agricultural damage and lead to the driving out of native species. There is no doubt that there is a link between the decline of the red squirrel and the arrival of the grey squirrel.

People may feel that I am being facetious when I raise the issue of Reeves's muntjac. I am sure that, apart from a few Members on my own Benches, the first time that anybody in the Chamber heard of

Reeves's muntjac was half an hour ago when I raised the question with Mr Shannon. Reeves's muntjac is a small species of deer which escaped captivity in England around 50 years ago. It has bred and is now, perhaps, the most common species of deer in the United Kingdom. It causes enormous damage to farms and forests. The damage that it has done to vegetation has caused a considerable loss of wildlife, to the extent that it has been suggested that Reeves's muntjac are the reason why the number of nightingale is declining rapidly in the southern counties of England.

I have asked the Minister about that species. I say to him that as an absolute priority, his Department must take urgent action to have the small number of Reeves's muntjac that can be found in Northern Ireland rounded up and either kept in captivity or taken back to England. The Assembly cannot allow that species to spread and cause enormous damage to the countryside. Therefore, the introduction of species is not an academic issue. It is an issue that could cost the Provinces' economy millions of pounds. The zebra mussel is another issue; it has got into the Erne and Lough Neagh water systems and is causing huge damage.

4.45 pm

There is never good news when an alien species is introduced. The legislation needs to reflect that and be tightened to ensure that those species are not introduced. A programme on the mainland of Britain to eradicate the ruddy duck has already cost more than £1 million, which shows just how difficult it is to eradicate such species once they are in the environment.

I also share the concern of the RSPB on nature Europa sites. As Members will know, the basic form of protection for areas of outstanding scientific interest is ASSI designation, which gives considerable protection to habitats such as raised bogs and woodlands. However, there are more extensive areas called special protection areas (SPAs), and I am aware of two. The SPA that I am most directly involved in is the Antrim Hills and Glens, which is there to protect hen harrier and merlin. The problem is that those protections are not underlined by ASSI designation. At the moment, there are very limited powers to protect those habitats. Damage is being done to the upper Glenshesk part of the Antrim Hills SPA, and I have referred the matter to the Department. A large shooting syndicate has moved in and developed the area with roads, shooting hides and feed stations for partridge, I believe. That is doing major damage to that part of the SPA, and there are extremely limited powers in the present legislation to address that issue. I welcome the increased legislation, but I agree with the RSPB that it needs to be tightened considerably.

I move on to the two major issues on which there will be considerable debate and some division in the

Assembly. The two issues that have caught the public's imagination are snares and the Irish hare. I remember sitting as a rookie Back-Bench MLA where Mr Molloy is sitting, on the extreme of the Bank Benches, and here I am 25 years later on the extreme of the Back Benches, so I have not gone too far — just across the Chamber. However, I remember arguing vociferously from that very seat in 1983 for the banning of snares. I lost that vote and we have tolerated the use of snares ever since. We had a ban on self-locking snares, and it is important that Members understand the difference. A snare is a piece of wire attached to a solid surface or a fence post, which an animal can walk into by mistake and become entangled by its neck. Self-locking snares lock round the animal's neck, and as it struggles the wire gets tighter and tighter and often strangles the animal. It is an extremely cruel way to kill an animal.

Ordinary free-running snares do not self lock but stay round the animal. Under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, the gamekeeper or farmer is supposed to check the snares every 24 hours. If the animal is protected or not a target species, it is released; a fox or rabbit is knocked on the head and killed.

In my capacity of checking peregrine falcon sites in Northern Ireland, I spend huge amounts of time in the countryside during June and July, and I have come across the most dreadful scenes of animals caught in snares. I have found protected species, badgers in particular, but also domestic cats and dogs. By the time I come across an animal it is usually dead. It is obvious that no one has checked that snare in 24 hours, and in some cases in 24 days or 24 weeks. The animal had suffered a ghastly death. No one checks snares.

Snares are indiscriminate. According to the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 48% of the animals caught are non-target species; badgers, otters and hedgehogs, and, in Scotland, pine martens are killed. Snares are grossly indiscriminate; they do not differentiate between protected and non-protected species.

I accept that there are times when foxes and rabbits need to be killed. I am not stupid. There are times when they cause severe damage to farmers and to game; however, unlike snares, there are species-specific ways of killing those animals. It is time to address that issue. An opinion poll showed that 70% of the people of Northern Ireland want a total ban on snares.

As things stand, we as a civilised society can no longer stand over the use of snares. The present regulations are unworkable, and I believe that we could do something positive for animal welfare by including a complete ban in the legislation.

There may be specific times when, for special reasons, a landowner needs to use snares. In those circumstances, he or she could apply for a specific

licence to do so. There is nothing in the Bill preventing someone from applying for a licence to do something that is prohibited at the moment. That is the way of controlling the system. That means that if farmer Smith or farmer Jones wish to use snares, a licence can be given, with attached conditions, and the Department can oversee the use of that licence. I think that that is the way forward, but in the vast majority of cases snares are no longer necessary. I plead with the House to consider landing a fundamental blow for animal welfare by banning snares forever in the Province. Then, if it is discovered that they are being illegally used, at least we can do something about it.

The ban on self-locking snares has been totally useless. People are still using them, and it is a dreadful way for an animal to be killed. It is not always the case that the animal is caught by the neck. Sometimes it is caught by the leg, or it is cut in two by the snare because it is caught in the midsection of the body. As the honourable Member for East Antrim has said, that is not a very pleasant sight. People's views on animal welfare have moved on, and snares are no longer required.

I also wish to speak on the vexed issue of the protection of hares. I see that Mr Shannon is back in the Chamber, and no doubt we will clash on that issue. He is out of line with public opinion, because 75% of the people of Northern Ireland have stated that they want a ban on hare coursing. Younger Members of the House may not even know what hare coursing is, although I suppose the only people who qualify are Mr Beggs and Ms McCann; the rest of you are probably old enough to remember.

Mr T Clarke: What about this gentleman over here?

Mr Wells: Sorry, I forgot about Mr Clarke. If one is under 30 years old, there is no doubt that one will have no idea what I am talking about. The Irish form of hare coursing as practised at Clonmel or Crebilly, until changes in 1993, involved two greyhounds being set loose on a hare that is kept in captivity. That hare runs down an enclosed course and is chased by the greyhounds. Judges mark the course on the basis of the twisting and turning of the hounds in their attempt to kill the hare, and, to make it even worse, bookmakers sit at the side of the track taking bets on which is the more skilled of the greyhounds. In a civilised society, that barbaric activity should be confined to the annals of history forever. It is a disgrace that it ever happened in Northern Ireland in the first place, and that anyone would even contemplate continuing it.

I say to Mr Shannon that the vast majority of sportsmen — though some people might not accept that term — are responsible and wish to ensure a cruelty-free environment, but that any of his supporters, or any of the organisations that he is

involved in, can stand over the possibility of a resumption of hare coursing is, to me, appalling. I personally think that people like Mr Shannon are embarrassed, but they do not wish to support a ban on coursing because they are worried that it may be the thin edge of the wedge. They say that if hare coursing is banned today, it will be fox-hunting tomorrow, and then it will be fishing the following day. That was the same argument that was used when people were attempting to abolish bear-baiting and badger-baiting many centuries ago. There are certain activities that are simply so cruel that a modern, civilised society has to make them illegal.

I understand that there is a special protection order, and am delighted that the Minister, in his wisdom, has confirmed that on several occasions. That is good news, but the problem is that it is subject to an annual review. I passionately believe that the Bill should be changed so that schedule 7 includes a permanent protection to prevent hares being killed, trapped or removed from their natural environment. That would mean that there would be no doubt and no grey areas. People would know exactly where they stand.

When the practice of hare coursing was effectively made impossible by the special protection order, it was only being practised at two sites in Northern Ireland: Crebilly in north Antrim and Eglish in south Tyrone. The special protection order has stopped it. Does anybody care? Is there anybody who has lost their job over it? There certainly is not.

The public were 100% behind that and were perfectly happy with it. I want both of those courses closed permanently, and the vast majority of people would accept that.

In 1982, I stood in Crebilly with Peter Robinson, who was then the Chairman of the Environment Committee at Stormont, and the late Lord Henry Dunleath, as we watched hare coursing. I still remember the squeals of the three hares that were caught, as they were ripped apart by the hounds in front of several hundred people. Is that something that we want in a civilised society? It might be argued that the hounds are now muzzled, but one or two hares die each time because they are beaten by the hounds. However, that is not the issue; the issue is the terror that the hare must feel as he or she is coursed down an enclosed area, being watched by so-called human beings who are baying for blood. That is not acceptable.

The hares have to be captured several weeks before the event, and they are kept in confined locations. Some of them are kept in boxes, which is totally inappropriate. It is an extremely stressful thing for a hare to endure. They are then coursed, and, if they are lucky enough to survive, they are released back to the

natural environment, but the stress must have a long-term impact on them.

There is another issue aside from cruelty. I had a wry smile on my face when Mr Shannon eulogised about the lovely, brown Irish hares that were bouncing along his estate in Greyabbey, and, almost with emotion, he told us that they bred and had young hares. But the honourable Member believes that it is right for someone to capture the same hares and course them at Crebilly. I notice that he has not asked me to give way, but I will do so, because I would like to know where the consistency is in that. How can he have a wonderful, sentimental appreciation of a lovely animal and then say that it is acceptable to capture and course them? It is simply not on.

During the debate, Members from every party have said that the practice of hare coursing has to stop. In 30 years' time, the Minister will not be remembered for the clauses that he moves in the RPA or the minor amendments that he makes to the planning Order. If he goes down in history as the person who saved the Irish hare, he will be a national hero and an institution. No one remembers anything about Margaret Thatcher from her time as Education Minister except for the fact that she took away the free milk. She is still known as Margaret Thatcher the milk snatcher. In 30 years' time, when the honourable Member for Lagan Valley will, no doubt, be a member of the House of Lords and have reached the pinnacle of his political career, would he not like to then be known as Lord Poots of Lagan Valley, the politician who saved the Irish hare? I am sure that he would.

I urge the Minister to join with the 75% of people who support that, and I have no doubt that the proportion of people who support it in Lagan Valley is even higher. Let us be able to tell our children that this Assembly took the action that led to the final death knell for that barbaric so-called sport.

Apart from that, the legislation is generally sound. I have been critical, but I have homed in on only four or five issues. A few minor amendments will create an excellent piece of legislation. I mentioned that I witnessed hare coursing in 1983, which was 27 years ago. That shows when the next opportunity might occur to change the legislation. Some Members, such as Mr Burns and Mr Trevor Clarke, are young enough to be back here in 25 years time, but, for some of the rest of us, this is the last opportunity to change the legislation. Let us get it right and let us give the best possible protection to our wildlife. I believe that the people of Northern Ireland are with us on that.

Mr B Wilson: The Green Party broadly welcomes the Bill and the fact that it updates the 1985 Order, which is long overdue.

I particularly welcome the introduction of the statutory duty on government and public bodies to take action to further the conservation of biodiversity. The UK signed the biodiversity convention in 1992, so the issue is long-standing. It is an indictment of government that we have had to wait for so long for such a duty to be placed on public bodies.

5.00 pm

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

The value of biodiversity is hard to exaggerate, therefore, I am pleased that clause 2 places a duty on the Department of the Environment to designate and publish a biodiversity strategy. However, I am concerned that there is no requirement on the Department to report on the strategy's progress every three years, as was suggested in the consultation document. The Bill states:

"The Department must from time to time publish a report regarding the implementation of any strategy so designated."

How often are such periodic reports to be produced? The Green Party proposes that the Department should report on the strategy every three years.

Clause 3 calls upon the Department to publish lists of animals that require particular conservation attention and to take steps to further the conservation of such priority species. What is meant by "take steps"? That needs to be clarified.

Mr Wells and Mr Ford pointed out that one such endangered animal is the Irish hare. I have been interested in the Irish hare for many years. In fact, as Mr Wells said, I spent my Boxing Days in the 1970s and early 1980s protesting in the freezing cold at Crebilly. I assure Members that we were all disgusted that that barbaric practice continued for so long.

I have another long-standing interest, because my former colleague Bertie McConnell, who was MP for Bangor, introduced a Bill to abolish hare coursing to the Parliament of Northern Ireland in 1970. That Bill was passed by the House of Commons but was turned down by the Senate. The following year, he introduced a similar Bill, which was again passed by the Commons. However, it was delayed by the Senate, and then the Northern Ireland Parliament was prorogued, so it never became law.

Mr Wells also referred to Lord Dunleath, who also introduced legislation in the Northern Ireland Assemblies of 1973 and 1982. Those Bills were passed without division, but, again, the Assemblies fell before that legislation could be enacted.

Mr Wells: I am slightly worried to hear that each time a Northern Ireland Government tried to ban hare coursing, the Assembly collapsed. I hope that the Member is not making any prophecies.

Mr B Wilson: It is a very interesting sequence of events — oh gosh, we could see a similar situation. I hope that this legislation passes before this Assembly succumbs.

Mr Wells: We had better be quick, then.

Mr B Wilson: Yes.

It is clear that the elected representatives of Northern Ireland have been in favour of banning hare coursing for more than 40 years, but that willingness has not yet been translated into legislation. The Bill gives us the opportunity to introduce long-awaited measures to protect the Irish hare.

In recent years, the Department has issued a special protection Order each year to protect the Irish hare, the numbers of which had declined significantly in the previous 20 years. Evidence cited in the consultation document shows that, even since the special protection order was introduced in 2002, there has been no significant increase in the Irish hare population. The special protection order has been shown to be ineffective. I propose that the Irish hare should receive permanent protection and should be included in the amendment to schedule 5 to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, “Animals Which Are Protected at All Times”. In my view, as long as the Irish hare continues —

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. For many weeks, I have wished to raise this point, and I must raise it now. The honourable Member for North Down Mr Brian Wilson was speaking when two Members walked in front of him. They walked between the Speaker’s Chair and the Member who was speaking. I find that extremely distracting and disrespectful. Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like you to speak to the Speaker and seek a ruling on the matter. That practice would not be tolerated in any parliamentary Chamber, including the Dáil, anywhere else in Europe. It has to stop, because it is extremely off-putting. I am not being critical of the Members who walked past, but we need to stop that practice immediately.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members have to show courtesy to others in the Chamber, particularly to whoever is speaking. I will raise the matter with the Speaker to see whether it can be dealt with.

Mr B Wilson: As long as the Irish hare continues to be regarded as a game species, its population will remain under threat. The current situation whereby the Irish hare is protected only during certain periods of the year sends an inconsistent message and hampers any enforcement of a protection order. That can be resolved only by adding the Irish hare to schedule 5, thereby removing that uncertainty.

We also supported the original proposals to increase protection for the curlew by moving it from schedule 2

to schedule 1. We are disappointed that that proposal has been dropped. That matter should be reconsidered, given the parlous local status of the curlew.

The Green Party also supports a strengthening of control on the use of snares, particularly an outright ban on self-locking snares to prevent unnecessary suffering. However, the Bill does not go far enough. Clause 10(3) states that use of the snare is prohibited where it is:

“calculated to cause unnecessary suffering to any wild animal”.

The issue is whether the snare is likely to cause unnecessary suffering, and I recommend that the wording be amended to reflect that. The word “calculated” provides a loophole that will, in effect, make it legal to use a device that will inevitably cause suffering to an animal. I do not believe that the requirement for snares to be checked on a daily basis can mitigate the suffering that they cause. That is unenforceable and therefore does not provide adequate protection for wild or domestic animals that may be caught in those indiscriminate devices. If the Department is serious about preventing unnecessary suffering, the only viable option is a complete ban on snares.

The Department’s consultation paper, ‘Review of: The Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985’, refers on a number of occasions to preventing unnecessary suffering of wild animals, so the Department clearly recognises that it has a responsibility in that area. I am surprised, therefore, that the paper includes no proposal to end the inherently cruel and barbaric practice of hunting with dogs. Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK to allow that barbaric practice, and the review of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 afforded us the perfect opportunity to end that activity once and for all. The remit of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 includes the protection of wild birds, mammals and plants, and my understanding is that we are here to improve the provisions of that Order. Why, then, has hunting with dogs been ignored when it is so fundamental to our discussions?

I turn to the Department’s proposal to abolish game licences. Although it is recognised that the current systems are archaic, the Green Party cannot support the Department’s proposal to deregulate the system completely. To have no monitoring of those activities is contrary to other provisions in the Bill to support conservation efforts. The Department recognises that fact in its own consultation documents, which is why I cannot understand why no alternative monitoring system is provided for in the Bill.

Paragraph 154 of the consultation paper states:

“it is recognised that there may be some concern from conservationists that the lack of a proper monitoring system could

lead to unacceptable pressures on wildlife...the Government recognises the need for an improved system for monitoring the numbers of bird species (game birds and quarry species) taken through hunting to ensure that hunting practices remain sustainable.”

Why have no alternative provisions been included in the Bill?

A number of suggestions were made during the consultation, including the licensing of individual shoots, including an agreed limit on the number of individual species that could be killed. However, the Department seems to have ignored all such proposals. I am open-minded on the method of monitoring, but having no monitoring at all could have a disastrous impact on the conservation of game birds and quarry species.

The Green Party welcomes the two offences that the Bill creates to protect ASSIs, which are an important part of our environmental heritage. Reckless and unnecessary damage to those sites is damaging to the whole community, and it is important that that be recognised in legislation. We welcome the proposal to give the Department power to erect signs and notices in those areas to provide information and increase awareness of ASSIs. It is important that efforts be made to raise awareness of the importance of those sites. The previous Environment Minister had to be taken to court by Friends of the Earth to learn the true status of ASSIs, so it seems that there remains considerable ignorance on that matter.

My party also has concerns regarding the issue of licences under article 5(6) of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. Who is responsible in the Department for granting those licences? Can we be assured that that is not just a rubber-stamping exercise and that each application will be properly scrutinised?

My party welcomes clause 13, which relates to the prohibition of the sale of non-native species, and we suggest that the aquatic nursery trade deserves special attention regarding such sales. We are concerned that there may not be adequate staff to police that provision. We support clauses 18, 19 and 20 on enforcement but are concerned that they may not be adequately policed. Have the PSNI been consulted, and will special training be given to the police personnel who are likely to be involved in the enforcement of the Bill?

Clause 20 strengthens the powers of the Department's wildlife inspectors. Are there plans to increase the number of inspectors to enforce those powers?

My party broadly welcomes the Bill, but we believe that in certain areas it can be improved to protect biodiversity, enhance conservation and prevent the unnecessary suffering of animals. We also welcome the introduction of new offences, but we are concerned as to the policing and enforcement of the new powers,

particularly as it is indicated that no extra funding will be available.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): I am grateful for Members' contributions to the debate; they have been both valuable and informative. I will respond to some of the issues raised.

After all the hullabaloo of yesterday, we are down to realpolitik today. These are the issues that, while they might be a bit of a grind on occasions, affect the public and the community. In this House, we are supposed to be delivering on an agenda, whether it is on the environment, health, education or any other aspect. People should take a lot of goodwill out of this debate and a lot of hope. If we can get Jim Wells and Jim Shannon agreeing on a number of issues, we might even get the policing and justice issue resolved at some point. *[Interruption.]* If we can get that far today, it demonstrates how far we can reconcile opposites on occasions. It has been a valuable debate.

Dolores Kelly spoke on behalf of the Committee and broadly welcomed the Bill: I appreciate that. I look forward to working with the Committee, through my officials, on the issues that are of concern to it. The Committee has additional ideas, which it will want to put to my Department. We will give those ideas due care and attention, as we have done in respect of previous Bills. There has been a close working relationship between the Department and the Committee on a range of issues with respect to previous legislation. I assure the House that my Department will seek to accommodate and work with the Committee as far as possible.

The one issue that was of particular relevance today may be summed up as “snares and hares”. Nearly every Member who spoke had a comment to make on that, including Mrs Kelly, and I will deal with those issues in turn.

Peter Weir also broadly welcomed the Bill. He asked about temporary stop notices. As regards stop notices and reinstatement notices not included in the Bill, there will be consultation on a new and comprehensive range of sanctions for application across a number of environmental regimes. That is currently being held in England and Wales. Those sanctions include powers to issue stop and reinstatement notices. It is prudent to await the outcome of the consultation and introduction of the proposed measures in England and Wales before making decisions on appropriate mechanisms in Northern Ireland. It will be more effective to make comprehensive regulations from those notices, rather than limit them to ASSIs.

Danny Kinahan and Cathal Boylan spoke about guidance on biodiversity. The Department will draft practical and appropriate guidance for public bodies to

assist them in their duties. Most Departments currently embrace nature conservation measures as a part of their duties. That is something which we hope will continue.

Cathal Boylan also referred to game licensing systems and appropriate legislation for the sale of venison. The poaching of deer and the sale of unlawfully taken deer are already offences under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, and we should thank Mr Wells for introducing that. He has the grey hair that demonstrates that he has been here that length of time, and he may well still be here in 30 years' time. He rhapsodises about not eating meat and says that that is going to make him live a lot longer than the rest of us; so there might be a young-looking octogenarian in the Chamber in 30 years' time, fighting the good fight for wildlife. However, anyone who is prosecuted for such offences is liable to a fine of up to £5,000 or a custodial sentence of up to three months or both, and that will not change.

5.15 pm

The protection of the curlew was raised, and the recent change in its conservation status on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's red list of threatened species is something that we wish to acknowledge. I also acknowledge the positive response by many shooting interests in Northern Ireland, who have recognised the increasing threat to the breeding population and have already engaged in a voluntary moratorium on hunting curlew. My Department will continue to encourage those who have not yet made similar commitments to do so. The success of that voluntary initiative will be monitored.

Brian Wilson said that the hare population had not risen despite the fact that a special protection order for hares has been in place for eight years. That does not exactly strengthen the argument that people should not take or kill hares; it demonstrates that the main problem is associated with habitat management. On a personal level, I have real difficulties with the killing of hares, curlews and other species, and I am happy to work with the Committee to address those issues. However, I want to make it absolutely clear that a ban on killing those animals will not necessarily mean that there will be more of them in a number of years, and Mr Wilson made that point accidentally. It has a lot to do with how we manage habitats and how we ensure that those species have appropriate habitats.

Why are badgers, which are plentiful, on quarry lists and protected lists when curlews, hares and some other species which are fewer in number are not? When I posed that question, I found out that badgers are on the list in order to try and prevent badger-baiting; it is not because they are scarce. When one drives down the road, one will see that there is no scarcity of badgers; they are continually getting knocked down. I have to

ask the question: is this the best way to deal with badger-baiting, or should we be looking to the legislation here? I welcome the fact that the legislation has been enhanced in that respect. However, the legislation that we are seeking to introduce will enable the authorities to prosecute individuals who set out with spades and dogs, normally lurchers, to hunt badgers.

I will tease that out a little more. What powers will the police have to take such people to court? If the police find dogs and their owners say that they are hunting foxes, not badgers, the dogs must be examined at that point. Dogs with scars on their faces associated with badger-baiting make for a strong case. That is a better route to take, rather than having badgers on the protected list while other animals such as hares and curlew are kept off it. That is an issue for the Committee to consider further.

Those are issues on which I appreciate the work of the Committee because it can carry out wider consultations and hear what others have to say.

There are other difficult arguments on the use of snares. For example, a group in Glenwherry has, with our support, brought in gamekeepers, although I do not know how it did that. The group has been promoting species such as the red grouse, the Irish hare, snipe and curlew. In doing that, it has, over the past number of years, taken about 600 foxes. That is because, in that area, one species, for whatever reason, became too prominent, to the detriment of all other species. I am glad that that group has removed 600 foxes. Some people do not like that; however, removing those foxes will allow species that are under threat to thrive in the habitats that have been created and allow them to make a return. We have to recognise that there are challenges.

On limited occasions, snares may be appropriate, although I find them very distasteful and have real difficulties with them. I am not unsympathetic to Members who said that we should have an outright ban on snares. Other Members said that there should be stiff licensing of snares, and I am not unsympathetic to that either.

Mr Wells: The Minister must realise that the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 did not abolish anything: it was always at landowners' discretion to apply for a licence to carry out something that would normally be illegal.

The Minister mentioned the situation at Glenwherry, of which we are all aware. However, I understand that many of those foxes were shot rather than snared. The RSPB supports the Glenwherry experiment and provides the group with considerable advice. However, in a special situation such as that, all the landowner has to do is apply for a specific licence to use snares and then officials will know on what land snares are being used and can check to see that the licence conditions

are being met. However, that does not mean that anyone can use snares. I am sure that in Glenwherry snares are checked every 24 hours, that self-locking snares are not used and that, where a protected species or domestic animal is caught indiscriminately, it is released unharmed.

That is the solution and the compromise. It is not about banning the use of snares; it is about using snares under strict control and through a licence.

The Minister of the Environment: I thank the Member for his point. The rapid rise in the population of foxes could cause problems for people with free range chickens, a considerable number of sheep or during lambing season.

Mr Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of the Environment: I will in a moment.

It is a concern that needs to be dealt with rationally. I have made it clear how sympathetic I am to an outright ban on snares. However, we need to deal with the issue rationally and sensibly. People could end up using alternatives, such as poisoning, which can affect many more animals and the bird population and can be even more damaging than snares. It is easier to use unlawful methods in that situation than it is to use snares. Therefore, an outright ban could be counterproductive. I will be interested to hear the Committee's views on the issue as well as those of the various parties that make submissions to the Committee. I hope that we can get a good outcome.

Mr Shannon: The Minister is aware, as, I hope, is the Assembly, that the issue is about more than checking snares every 24 hours. However, those who use snares to catch foxes check their snares at least twice a day, morning and evening. Snares can be used correctly and under controlled management.

Mr Wells made a comment about having a licensed system. When foxes strike, people need to strike right away to ensure that they are controlled. People cannot wait until they get a licence, which is one of the problems with the process.

The Minister of the Environment: I thank the Member for his point and have no doubt that it will be made during the discussions. We will seek to arrive at a sensible and reasonable outcome.

Mr Ford referred to the biodiversity duty and asked how we ensure that Departments embrace it. The DOE will encourage officials in other Departments to embrace biodiversity. That work has been ongoing for several years and has resulted in biodiversity implementation plans. Departments will report on their compliance with that duty.

Mr Ford also raised the issues of updating schedules and permanent nests. The updating of schedules can be done at any time through subordinate legislation. However, I heard what Members said, and we will hear what the Committee has to say in due course. We will consider the case for permanent nests for other bird species.

Mr Ford also referred to the Irish hare, an issue that I have already sought to address. To avoid him giving himself or his researchers work to do by finding out what my position was on the issue in 2002, I will outline that position: I stood for greater protection for the Irish hare, and I want to see greater protection for the Irish hare in 2010. I do not just want to see the Irish hare conserved; I want to see its population grow significantly over coming years. Therefore, we will pursue any measures that we can take to do that. I made it clear that I think that measures to increase the population will be more based on habitat management than on protection.

Mr Ford referred to the protection of ASSIs, and I look forward to hearing the detailed proposals that might come from the Committee on that issue.

I welcome Mr Shannon's contribution to the debate, because it was an important one. There are many thousands of people, probably tens of thousands, in Northern Ireland who engage in the activities to which Mr Shannon referred. The views of those people are important, and many of them are engaged in conservation work. Although Mr Wells may say that they conserve species to shoot them, many of those people are introducing management practices. I know that from my own farm, which now has pheasants, because others introduced pheasants to their estates. Those pheasants have managed to make their way to my humble property and are very much enjoying themselves on it safe in the knowledge that Mr Poots has no intention of shooting them. I did not introduce the pheasants to my property; other people introduced them to their estates. People who engage in field sports are creating habitats and engaging in management that allows many species to be reintroduced and to thrive.

We need to keep the foreshore shooting season consistent with that in the Republic of Ireland, bearing in mind that we share waters at Foyle and Carlingford. We can have that discussion with our colleagues in the South of Ireland.

The issue of liaising with the shooting community was mentioned. When working on the Bill, officials consulted widely and at length with the shooting community. We will continue to regularly liaise with that community; for example, we will be involved with the species action plan.

Forest Service leases were also mentioned. It is for each public authority to decide how it controls activity

on its land; the DOE cannot dictate to the Forest Service about how to do that. Mr Shannon may want to raise that in the Agriculture Committee, which he is a member of.

We will consider the details of the duty to notify a change of ownership and signage in ASSIs in due course.

5.30 pm

Mr Wells raised the issue of the muntjac deer. A control plan is in place, and officials have been in discussion with local deer societies about control options. I suppose that one option might be to let Mr Shannon loose in areas where one becomes aware of those deer and allow him to shoot away to his heart's content. Jim Wells may prefer to round those deer up and put them in a home for small deer somewhere. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Beggs raised a number of issues, the first of which was the biodiversity duty to achieve balance between socio-economic and environmental interests. He also referred to education on biodiversity, and NIEA will hold many educational and awareness events during 2010, which has been designated the international year of biodiversity.

He raised the issue of increased powers for wildlife inspectors. They will be given the power to enter any premises, other than a dwelling, to investigate whether certain offences are taking place, such as the keeping of captive birds or trade in live or dead birds, animals or plants. A specific power of entry will be provided for the purpose of obtaining information prior to processing applications for licences or for checking compliance with licence conditions, including the power to enter dwellings. Wildlife inspectors will have power to require the taking of blood or DNA samples from specimens for evidential purposes, subject to controls that require that samples from a live bird or animal be taken by a veterinary surgeon only.

I will address the points that Mr Wells made, which, to some degree cross over with those made by Brian Wilson. Mr Wells highlighted his concerns about the snipe, the redshank and the curlew. We look forward to full consideration of that matter at Committee Stage, when we will take account of the most up-to-date information. Mr Wells made the point that the introduction of species such as the red kite had moved the issue on. We will give that due consideration. He also referred to the need for permanent protection of the nest sites of the peregrine falcon and the golden eagle. We look forward to considering additional protection for a number of bird species during Committee Stage. It is our desire to provide protection for the nests of golden eagles.

Mr Wells referred to several other invasive species, and we will consider culling those species. He raised the issue of grey squirrels and red squirrels, although

many people find it difficult to accept a cull of grey squirrels. However, the fact that introduced species subsequently become invasive leads to all sorts of problems. We might need to consider that matter in due course.

There was mention of special protection areas that are not underpinned by ASSI designation. Better protection is needed, and we propose to review and update the Northern Ireland conservation regulations. The treatment of the Irish hare and hare coursing are issues for the Department for Social Development; they are not DOE issues. However, if the weight of opinion during Committee Stage favours a ban, that will need further consideration as a separate policy issue.

Mr Wells: If I were an Irish hare, I would feel much happier under the protection of the honourable Member for Lagan Valley than under that of the honourable Member for South Down. *[Laughter.]* There must surely be a rationale for bringing all animal welfare and protection under the auspices of Mr Poots's Department. It is bizarre in the extreme that the Department for Social Development is in charge of that issue. Given that the honourable Member for South Down Ms Ritchie deals with housing, social security and urban regeneration, I would not think that the protection of hares is top of her agenda. There seems to be no logic in the fact that she has control over that matter, and I am sure that she would not feel robbed of a major part of her Department's responsibility if it were transferred to the Department of the Environment.

The Minister of the Environment: The Member said that a number of people at Crebilly were taking bets on which greyhound would do best on the hare course. That aspect falls under the control of the Department for Social Development, but, of course, if we put special protection orders in place in Northern Ireland, those people cannot take the hares in order to pursue that activity. I understand that people in the Republic of Ireland continue to take hares to engage in coursing, so Ms Ritchie may wish to discuss that issue with her Department.

Mr Wells and Brian Wilson spoke about limiting the use of snares under licence, and I addressed that issue at length earlier in the debate. I trust that I have covered most of the issues that Members raised. If I have not, I will accept written questions or submissions from them. Members of the Committee for the Environment may also wish to raise issues in the Committee process.

I thank Members for their contributions to the debate on the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill. It has been a bit of a marathon, surprisingly enough, but that demonstrates the Bill's usefulness. I am confident that the provisions of the Bill will help us to conserve

and enhance our biodiversity. The biodiversity duty will reinforce the important role that government and public bodies can have in that regard.

To quote a Native American proverb:

“We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors. We borrow it from our children.”

Let us pass on to our children an environment that is in good condition. Wildlife crime matters. It has an impact on our environment and on the ecosystems, habitats and wildlife that support our very existence. Stronger enforcement powers, including custodial sentences, will help us to detect and deter criminals.

When I spoke about badger baiting, I should have said that many of the people who engage in it are also involved in dog fighting. That fraternity, for want of a better word — or more appropriately, group of nasty individuals — deserves to have the full weight of the law applied to those activities. It is particularly repulsive that those activities still go on in Northern Ireland. We must do whatever we can as a legislative body to prevent those activities and to ensure that the people who engage in them are appropriately punished. I welcome any assistance that Members can give me in doing that. I am sure that Ms Gildernew and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development share that view, as well as any other Members or Ministers who have a part to play.

My officials and I look forward to working closely with the Committee for the Environment as it begins its detailed scrutiny of the Bill. I have no doubt that that will prove to be valuable. I am pleased to commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill [NIA 5/09] be agreed.

Pensions Regulator Tribunal (Transfer of Functions) Bill

Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call on the Minister for Social Development to move the Consideration Stage of the Pensions Regulator Tribunal (Transfer of Functions) Bill.

Moved. — [*The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie).*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the six clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by three schedules and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 6 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 3 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Pensions Regulator Tribunal (Transfer of Functions) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker.*]

ADJOURNMENT

Natural Gas: East Antrim

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 seven minutes.

Mr Ross: Adjournment debates are, generally, not particularly well attended, so it is nice to see that we have the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Acting First Minister in attendance, such is the importance of the issue.

The cold snap that we are experiencing has brought the issue of energy into sharp focus. Many people are struggling to pay high prices to heat their homes, and there have been stories in the national news about shortages of supply. East Antrim has always been fairly important when it comes to natural gas. Discussions about gas storage in salt caverns around Larne lough have been ongoing for several years. That would give us certainty of supply to a degree, but when natural gas was first brought to Northern Ireland in the middle of the 1990s, it was mainly used for the combined-cycle gas turbine at Ballylumford.

Today's debate is more about the people who live in East Antrim, and about giving them the choice of energy supply that others already have. Natural gas is already available in some parts of East Antrim, but we want to see that throughout the constituency, and the network extended up toward Whitehead.

In the summer of last year, a number of East Antrim representatives met representatives of Phoenix Natural Gas, who indicated that they wished to see their current licence area extended up the coast to Whitehead. We welcomed that and found it very encouraging. People were quite rightly excited, and there were a number of positive elements: it would give more choice to our constituents; employment opportunities would arise; and there are environmental benefits from the use of natural gas.

Gas is a cleaner and more efficient energy source for homeowners, tenants and businesses, all of whom could avail themselves of it. Infrastructure would be required should natural gas be extended to Whitehead. That would consist of road digging, pipe laying, resurfacing work, and system installation, all of which would provide employment at a time when many people in the constituency, and further afield, find themselves out of work. Although constituents

complain to us about road building and the upset that it causes, in this case, it would be because of a positive development.

It is good for people to have more of a choice than simply oil or coal, especially considering the way in which prices for those energy sources have risen in recent years. Competition can be good for business and for consumers. In that situation, a private company would put private money into the local community, and the public sector could also benefit. For example, the Housing Executive could change some of the heating sources in existing homes, and newbuild homes could have natural gas as an energy source.

There is also the matter of environmental output. The future will bring carbon taxation. There are already carbon targets, and gas has its role to play in that because gas-condensing boilers emit far less carbon than traditional oil boilers.

In the wider context, it is important that gas be available to more people in Northern Ireland than those who live in the greater Belfast area. Many Members wish to see more areas availing themselves of natural gas, and that is consistent with the Department's position. It is encouraging that Phoenix wants to bring gas to as many people as possible. Unfortunately, in recent months, a number of difficulties have been experienced in attempting to achieve and realise that goal.

5.45 pm

The Utility Regulator has an important role to play, and how it does its job will not be influenced by politicians. However, it is important that the Utility Regulator acts with the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland at heart. As I mentioned, I originally met Phoenix Natural Gas in July 2009 to listen to its plans to extend its network. At that stage, I had written to the Enterprise Minister and the Utility Regulator to voice my support for the extension of the gas line. I outlined the reasons why the extension was important and the benefit that there would be for the constituency and anyone who could avail themselves of the natural gas supply. I also mentioned the £2.4 million that the private sector would invest in the project if the greater Belfast and Larne licence area could be extended.

On 30 September 2009, I received a letter from the Utility Regulator saying that it was minded to approve applications for extensions to both Whitehead in my constituency and Saintfield in the Strangford constituency. However, in mid-November, it appeared that the Utility Regulator's conditions were such that Phoenix felt that it could no longer deliver the project. That was disappointing news for local representatives and for people living in Whitehead, who were looking forward to having a greater choice in energy source and the benefits that would come from that.

Although it is right and proper that the Utility Regulator conducted a full economic appraisal, it would be disappointing if the regulator did not look at all the options for ensuring that the project is successful. There are issues regarding the economic viability of such a project and whether extending the network to Whitehead alone is economically viable. However, if one looks at the entire area to which Phoenix would be delivering gas, one will see that there is more flexibility. I want to encourage people that progress can be made. I met Phoenix Natural Gas just before Christmas to hear about the difficulties that it was having in completing the project. Phoenix also reaffirmed its commitment to putting capital into the project if it was given acceptable and fair terms and conditions by the Utility Regulator. I have written to the energy regulator. Although I have not yet received anything back, I remain hopeful that we can find a resolution.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment cannot interfere with the work of the Utility Regulator in her words this evening. However, I hope that we will hear the Department reaffirm its commitment to ensuring that more people, homes and communities in Northern Ireland can avail themselves of natural gas. I hope that the Utility Regulator will listen to the views of local representatives in East Antrim, and those of the Department, and consider those seriously when deciding how to move forward on the issue. I hope that all the available options will be examined and that people in Whitehead will be able to avail themselves of natural gas in the not-too-distant future.

Mr Beggs: It seems quite strange that when the natural gas supply came to Northern Ireland, it came to Islandmagee, bypassed Whitehead and went to Carrickfergus and the greater Belfast area. The natural gas network has subsequently been extended to Ballymena and Londonderry, and Whitehead has missed out again. Of course, it was a high-pressure pipe that bypassed Whitehead. What is needed is a lower-pressure system and investment in the necessary infrastructure.

Extension of the natural gas supply to Whitehead was tantalisingly close and yet not delivered. That option would benefit the environment and, hopefully, provide best value for consumers. I am still hopeful that the option will be delivered at some point in the future. Like others, I was very encouraged when the Utility Regulator contacted me to indicate that it was minded to allow Phoenix to make normal profits and that it was hopeful that work would commence in early 2010. Sadly, however, that has not materialised.

In the Utility Regulator's discussions, he indicated that the issues are of an economic nature. Obviously, the pipeline must be paid for, the company that installs it must consider its economic rate of return, and the Utility Regulator has to determine that that profit is not

excessive. In reaching an agreement for a price mechanism, a price control agreement will be set in place, perhaps for decades and certainly for many years.

A balance must be struck between wanting a gas supply but not wanting it to be supplied at a price that allows excessive profits; the Utility Regulator has been given the job of achieving that balance. He considered the rate of return in the business plan to be excessive, and he wanted Phoenix to take on more risk, given that the situation is different than it was many years ago. It is not a complete gas start-up because gas is now a recognised fuel in Northern Ireland. Many people have the confidence to use it, and there is clearly a ready market for it.

The Utility Regulator has the difficult role of ensuring that gas is not supplied at a price that allows excessive profits. That is his job, and we must allow him that space. However, it is right that we ask questions to ensure that he is certain about his figures so that excessive profits are not made.

In the Utility Regulator's letter to me of 19 November 2009, I noticed that the original Phoenix proposal was not economic. He proposed to work with Phoenix to find a flexible approach to some of the issues and to deliver a positive outcome. He suggested a range of measures to improve the economics of the project. However, the letter stated that Phoenix did not wish to amend its original proposals, and it withdrew its application. It is disappointing that both sides did not continue their discussions and that a reasonable agreement was not reached. It is certainly in the interests of local consumers for gas to be available at a reasonable price.

It is impossible to talk about gas supplies and extending the network in East Antrim without commenting on the proposals for gas storage in the area. As the number of gas users in Northern Ireland increases, we must ensure that there is confidence in the supply. We are at the end of a very long European pipeline, and it is right and proper that opportunities for gas storage are explored, such as those being investigated by Portland Gas and others for the development of caverns in the deep layers of salt under Larne lough and the greater Larne area.

It is important that there is continuity of supply. We are all aware of events in Ukraine a number of years ago. We are also aware of how, at one point, gas supplies were very tight. Even in recent times, we understand that companies in the rest of the United Kingdom were being restricted in their gas usage because of demand. If the gas pipeline is extended, it is important that we create a stable supply so that that risk of interruption is removed.

A storage system would also create a more uniform price structure and more reliable prices. People in

Northern Ireland would not be subject to the peaks in gas prices to which they have been exposed in the past. I appreciate that there are many benefits to be derived from the development of an environmentally sensitive method of storing gas, and I hope that that can be achieved. Through the creation of an improved stability of supply and price mechanisms, more people will have the choice to switch to gas with the environmental improvements that come with it. However, we have to understand that there are risks that must be addressed.

I hope that discussions with Phoenix, or any other gas company that may be involved, will open up again in order that consideration will be given to supplying a gas pipe network to the Whitehead area so that local residents will have the option of using natural gas to heat their homes and so that businesses can take advantage, where appropriate, of the benefits of natural gas.

Mr Neeson: I wish the Minister well in her new post. I realise that it is a temporary position, but I know and am pleased that she will still devote her energies to DETI.

I have always been interested in extending the natural gas network to as many areas in Northern Ireland as possible. Members will know that I was to the fore in the campaign to extend the network to the north-west. That has happened, and I believe that opportunities exist to extend the network to other areas throughout Northern Ireland. I have raised that issue on a number of occasions in the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I know that officials will attend the Committee's meeting on Thursday to deal with the strategic energy framework consultation, and I look forward to that meeting. Believe it or not, energy issues have been one of the main subjects that the Committee has dealt with over the years.

East Antrim is the energy centre of Northern Ireland. We have Ballylumford power station, Kilroot power station, the interconnector and natural gas coming into the area. Furthermore, as other Members said, we are looking at the prospect of gas storage in the Larne/Islandmagee area. All in all, we have a lot to contribute to energy supply in Northern Ireland.

Like other Members, I met Phoenix representatives early last year, and it was clear that they had carried out their research. As Members know, two licence extension applications have been made, one for Whitehead and the other for Saintfield. Indeed, I know that Simon Hamilton has worked very actively on the Saintfield application. Like other Members, I wrote to the Minister and to the Utility Regulator. Phoenix carried out research in the Whitehead area and identified 1,800 domestic and 50 commercial properties that could be supplied with natural gas.

One of the reasons why I have always supported the natural gas industry in Northern Ireland is because I

believe that consumers should be given choice. That is why I want the gas network to be extended to as many places as possible. I regret that not as many consumers have benefitted from the extension of the gas pipeline to the north-west as I believe should have. Hopefully, however, that situation will change at some time in the future.

The fact that Phoenix Natural Gas was going to invest somewhere in the region of £2.4 million of its own money clearly shows its commitment to the project.

The letter that I received at the end of September from the Utility Regulator seemed to suggest that the company supported the Whitehead project. I deeply regret that the impositions placed on Phoenix are now making that project more difficult to deliver. The fact that Kilroot power station recently installed a natural gas generator clearly shows the importance of the fuel to the area.

6.00 pm

As other Members have said, the Utility Regulator is independent, and we have to recognise the importance of his independence. In recent times, he has been very helpful, particularly to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. It is important that the Committee is kept informed. I would like the Utility Regulator to come to the Committee to explain why those difficulties have been placed in the way of this major investment.

However, I continue to hope that consumers in Whitehead will benefit from natural gas, bearing in mind that the pipeline just passes them by. Anything that can be done by the Department would be greatly appreciated.

Mr Hilditch: I thank my colleague Mr Ross for securing the Adjournment debate. I welcome the opportunity to support the views of my other colleagues in East Antrim.

Northern Ireland has the highest rate of fuel poverty in the United Kingdom, with one in three households suffering its effects. Given that we are trying to eradicate fuel poverty for all by 2016, now is a good time to extend the gas network throughout Northern Ireland in general and to East Antrim in particular. That will give people more ways to heat their homes, bearing in mind some of the latest figures available for that area — 23% of homes in Carrick and 36% of those in Larne are unable to heat their homes adequately, which is quite a statistic for an area that is part of the greater Belfast area.

It seems unfair that those homeowners on benefits and low incomes are also missing out on applying for the full provision offered by the warm homes scheme. Simply because they do not have the natural gas option, many do not meet the warm homes scheme

criteria. With its existing limited gas network, East Antrim has one of the lowest uptakes of help from the warm homes scheme. That is the remit of a different Department, but it has an impact.

As has been pointed out by other Members, it is disappointing that Phoenix Natural Gas will not be extending the licence to Whitehead in the late spring of this year. However, perhaps some work may be done on that and the situation will change as the year progresses, and the disappointment suffered by people in some 1,800 properties may be overturned.

Homeowners and businesspeople in Whitehead are not the only ones to be disappointed. For the majority of people, particularly those who live in other rural areas of East Antrim, heating their house or business with natural gas is not an option. Firmus Energy has not yet reached the area, giving Phoenix the monopoly in areas that are connected to the network. High fuel costs have forced people into fuel poverty, and, if other gas companies were able to extend into the area, Phoenix might be forced to offer some more competitive tariffs to our constituents.

Historically, natural gas is the most cost-effective fuel available to more than 20 million industrial, commercial and residential customers in Great Britain. It is time that we helped to extend our gas network across constituencies such as East Antrim. There are also health and safety benefits to be considered when weighing up the reasons behind installing gas supplies. In comparison to oil, the gas industry's charges, service delivery and safety are highly regulated, and, notably, some companies offer free annual boiler services to all of their customers within 20 working days of receiving a request.

We need only consider the impact that our freezing weather has had on oil heating systems throughout the Province in the past few weeks, during which many schools have been forced to close due to heating system breakdowns caused by freezing pipes, an impact that might be limited if other forms of energy were used, including natural gas. In fact, I rarely hear of anyone who complains that his or her gas system has broken down. However, people who have oil central heating appear to have endless problems, particularly in certain environmental conditions.

Environmentally, compared with alternative fuels, natural gas industrial and commercial customers prevented more than 6,250 tons of sulphur dioxide from entering the atmosphere in 2007. That is equivalent to a cloud of polluted air over one mile high covering the whole of Northern Ireland. Domestic customers prevented 1,450 tons of sulphur dioxide from entering the air. Those figures are not to be laughed at.

Extending our gas network will provide much-needed employment and give us an opportunity to increase our skilled workforce, as some Members outlined, and provide opportunities for apprenticeship placements. Increasing the provision of gas will make Northern Ireland more profitable for inward investors who are looking to locate their businesses in a constituency with energy choice. That would be welcome.

Therefore, extending the gas network will help to address fuel poverty. It will make East Antrim a cleaner, healthier place to live, and it will give customers a reliable and modern way of heating their homes at a competitive price, while, at the same time, providing our engineering and construction industries with more employment opportunities. I look forward to the Minister's response to this serious issue, and I thank Mr Ross for securing the Adjournment debate.

Mr K Robinson: I, too, pass on my congratulations to the Minister on her temporary appointment. However, I have a cautionary tale for her. My former Boys' Brigade captain was appointed temporarily for 25 years, so perhaps she should bear that in mind.

I thank Mr Ross for securing today's debate. It is very timely. Other Members have highlighted the importance of the power industry in East Antrim, with both Kilroot and Ballylumford power stations situated there. They generate the vast majority of electricity not only for Northern Ireland but for the Republic of Ireland, because electricity is also transported across the border. That power station's consumption is based on coal, gas and oil, and, from a security point of view and a strategic point of view, it is worthwhile for our economy and for our domestic users that it is so, particularly given the spell of bad weather that we have just suffered. The availability of those alternative sources of power is most welcome in the home and at work. This winter has highlighted the need to retain and to develop adequate strategic reserves of all three fuels. Therefore, as I said, today's debate is very timely.

Indeed, as we speak, areas of East Antrim are being surveyed and explored for their potential to develop underground storage caverns in Larne and Islandmagee, and that is very welcome. If the predictions are as accurate as they are supposed to be, the projects will secure the strategic supplies for the gas industry and domestic distribution for Northern Ireland into the foreseeable future. In the event of any emergency situation, we will not find ourselves the hostages to fortune that we have been in the past, as Members have already said, with prices rising sharply, then going into a trough only to rise quickly again. The gas industry should have a bit of stability. Therefore, it appears somewhat out of step with that to learn that the recent application by Phoenix Natural Gas to the regulator for the extension of the distribution centres to include Whitehead has not, as yet, been granted.

Surely the opportunity for my constituents to access an alternative, sustainable and clean source of power would fit well into the general trends across not only Northern Ireland but across these islands and western Europe.

It appears that Phoenix Natural Gas had secured approval for investment in a Whitehead extension from its parent company, and it had prepared a detailed engineering and business plan to sustain that. In July 2009, it submitted to the regulator its application for extension to its licences in Whitehead and, as previously mentioned, in the Saintfield area. Initially, it appears that the regulator indicated in September that he was minded — that is a word that I have heard somewhere before — to grant a licence subject to certain conditions. Set in the context of DETI's completing its evaluation across Northern Ireland, that was perhaps very wise. However, in October, Phoenix Natural Gas informed the regulator that the conditions were unacceptable, and it now appears that, reluctantly, Phoenix has, on the foot of the regulator's interpretation of the situation, formally withdrawn its application.

I speak on behalf of my constituents in East Antrim — I am sure that I speak for all the other Members who have spoken and, indeed, the absent Member for East Antrim, who, no doubt, is gainfully employed elsewhere — when I say that this has come as a bit of a shock. We felt that being in proximity to the greater Belfast area would have some benefits for us. Perhaps like Newtownabbey Borough Council, we have learned bitterly over the years that sometimes it is a bad thing to be close to Belfast, because we can be ignored. I trust that the folk in Whitehead are not being ignored in relation to this.

I am hopeful, because Phoenix appears to be remaining positive in its desire to extend the system into East Antrim and to include Whitehead. I trust that the DETI review — again, we thank the Minister for her presence here today — will be completed in a manner that will enable Phoenix to resubmit its proposals for Whitehead, and that those will be acceptable in the eyes of the regulator.

Perhaps, in the post-DETI-reform era, the regulator's interpretation of the situation will enable this to be an effective and sustainable source of energy and to become available for both domestic and, as has been said, commercial interests in this part of my East Antrim constituency. I am sure that the Minister, given the other hat that she is currently wearing, has no doubt that the backbone of our economy, not just in East Antrim but in Northern Ireland, is the small and medium-sized enterprises. That is where the most major benefits could be developed, allowing smaller towns such as Whitehead to develop not just the domestic market but the potential commercial market that we need to generate life and vibrancy in those towns.

I hope that the Minister will take on board my comments and those of the other Members who have spoken and realise that there is unanimity across the political parties, as there always is in East Antrim when we are looking out for the benefit of our ratepayers and our constituents.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): First of all, I congratulate the Member on securing this Adjournment debate at a time when we are discussing the strategic energy framework for Northern Ireland, as has been referred to on a number of occasions. One of the chief goals in that framework is the improvement of the security and diversity of our energy supply. Alongside a commitment to increasing the proportion of our power that is generated from renewable sources, the framework highlights the possibility of extending Northern Ireland's gas network as a key element in our planning for the future. I do not want to go into all of the responses that we have had to the framework, of which there have been many, but that is one of the areas that has been very much welcomed.

As we have heard, natural gas was first brought to Northern Ireland in the very area that we are talking about today — in 1996, via the Scotland/Northern Ireland undersea gas pipeline (SNIP). That was principally, it must be said, to fuel electricity generation at the new combined cycle gas turbine at Ballylumford. I have some sympathy with Mr Neeson's view that East Antrim is the epicentre of energy, because we have Ballylumford, Kilroot and the SNIP there, and we are very much looking at gas storage. I will say a bit more about that later.

Since 1996, the industry has steadily expanded. In addition to being Northern Ireland's primary power generation source, gas now brings the cleanest-burning fossil fuel to a large number of homes and businesses throughout greater Belfast, including areas within East Antrim, and now, thankfully, to many other areas of the Province. Over the last 10 years, Phoenix Natural Gas has constructed significant gas networks and grown its customer base in its licence areas in greater Belfast and Larne to approximately 130,000 connected customers. This has helped to establish natural gas as a major competitive source of fuel for both the commercial and domestic energy sectors.

There has been further development of gas infrastructure in the past five years, with the construction of a major gas transmission pipeline to the north-west in 2004 — Mr Neeson made reference to that. It not only supplies fuel to the power station at Coolkeeragh, outside Londonderry, but brings gas to businesses and householders in urban areas such as Limavady, Londonderry, Coleraine, Ballymoney and Ballymena. Construction of a gas transmission link with the Republic of Ireland through the South/North

pipeline was completed in 2006, and that has provided security of supply in the event of gas from Scotland becoming unavailable. It has also led to natural gas being provided in the towns and cities of Newry, Banbridge, Craigavon, Armagh and Antrim.

6.15 pm

Firmus Energy was referred to, and it has approximately 6,000 consumers in the areas adjacent to the north-west and South-North pipelines and continues to roll out the gas infrastructure in its licence area.

However, I want to turn to the East Antrim constituency area. Natural gas has been available in many parts of the constituency, such as Larne and Carrickfergus, for some time. As part of its original development plan for the greater Belfast area, Phoenix Natural Gas has been supplying customers in those areas for a number of years. In 2007, Phoenix Natural Gas applied for, and was granted, permission to expand the gas network by bringing gas to Comber and to a quarry near Temple in County Down. Although we have heard that gas is available in major towns such as Larne and Carrickfergus, Mr Hilditch made the point that there are parts of East Antrim that are less densely populated, and, therefore, economically viable gas networks may not be possible. That is the difficulty with a rural constituency. However, work that we are undertaking to consider the potential for natural gas roll-out elsewhere will have direct relevance to the extension of gas networks in the East Antrim constituency.

I am, of course, aware that the industry has been considering how to have the roll-out of gas increased further, and Members referred to the application by Phoenix Natural Gas to take natural gas to Saintfield in County Down and to Whitehead. As Members said, applications were considered by the Utility Regulator, who has the main responsibility for issuing gas conveyance and supply licences. Unfortunately, it was not possible for Phoenix Natural Gas and the Utility Regulator to reach agreement on the economic aspects of taking gas to both towns, bearing in mind the cost for end users — a fact referred to by Mr Beggs — and Phoenix Natural Gas withdrew its application. However, I am hopeful that agreement can be reached to extend the natural gas network to provide customers with natural gas as an additional source of energy supply for all the reasons that Mr Hilditch outlined.

As I said in previous debates, and as was highlighted in the consultation on the new strategic energy framework, the Department is conscious of the need to encourage the continued development of the gas network, and it is taking several initiatives in relation to that. The Department, along with the Utility Regulator, has commissioned consultants to undertake a study to consider the technical issues and the costs and benefits associated with extending the natural gas

network in Northern Ireland, including a feasibility study of potential pipeline routes and gas loads in towns to the west and to the north-west of Northern Ireland, along with the consideration of the associated costs and benefits. That study is almost complete, and I am expecting a draft report shortly. It is important to say that conclusions will provide information not only on those areas being assessed in the study, but they will have direct relevance in relation to other areas of Northern Ireland for which proposals are being considered by the wider gas industry.

There are clear benefits to extending the natural gas network in Northern Ireland — some of which have been articulated this evening — including diversity of fuel supply and reduced greenhouse gas emissions. To that extent, we must consider the future development of the natural gas network, where it is economic to do so, to encourage a shift in the domestic use of oil to the more efficient use of gas.

So, in conjunction with the Utility Regulator and the major gas stakeholders, a gas strategic development group has been established to consider how the Northern Ireland gas market can be further developed. However, it must be stressed that the expansion of gas networks to towns in the west and other part of the north-west, the East Antrim constituency, or anywhere in Northern Ireland, can take place only where it is economic to do so. An important part of the gas extension study, and any consideration for extending the gas network, must be an assessment of realisable gas loads in the respective areas. Indeed, there are locations in the existing gas licence areas where take-up of natural gas has been disappointing in some sectors. Perhaps we need to look at why that is the case.

An extension to the gas network means a greater number of customers. That ensures that the cost of new gas networks is spread over a larger customer base; hence that element of all customers' gas bills is reduced. However, we may conclude that it does not make economic sense to take natural gas to all parts of Northern Ireland, although were I able to do so, I would, because gas is a marvellous energy resource. However, we must be realistic and recognise the financial considerations. Other energy solutions may be more appropriate for particular locations to which natural gas cannot be provided.

Mr Neeson: Is the Department still committed to the postalisation of natural gas? That was one of the main issues to emerge from the Committee's energy report about five years ago.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Someone's mobile phone is switched on. He or she should switch it off, because it is interfering with the transmission.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department's view is that postalisation

is still the way forward. However, we are now in the consultation phase of the strategic energy framework, and I am open to examining all those issues.

Many Members referred to gas storage. The further extension of the natural gas network offers additional fuel choice to consumers, but the security of energy supply is equally important. I am delighted by the continued development of, and interest in, the underground gas storage facility in East Antrim, and by the progress in geological research to establish whether the storage of natural gas in the deep underground caverns created in salt strata is possible.

As everyone in the Chamber knows — those of us who are here at the moment — we are entirely dependent on natural gas supplied from Great Britain, with the bulk of our gas being used for power generation. A gas storage facility in East Antrim would provide significant security of supply in the event of a failure of the supply from GB, and it would allow for gas to be purchased for storage during the summer months when wholesale gas prices tend to be lower, thus creating a competitive advantage.

Recent geological research concentrated on the Larne and Islandmagee areas. However, in September of last year, my Department completed an off-shore geological study of rock formations below the seabed off the east Antrim coast, with a view to providing geological information that might encourage investment in the off-shore energy storage, including natural gas. That is extremely positive for the East Antrim area, and Members appreciate the continuing work being done on that.

It is encouraging to see how the natural gas industry has expanded since its inception in 1996. It has done so as a result of the considerable efforts of the key industry players such as Phoenix Natural Gas and, more recently, Firmus Energy. I am also encouraged by the ongoing research by companies into the potential for gas storage in East Antrim. I fully realise the significant benefits offered by natural gas; it is the cleanest burning fossil fuel, and it is convenient for customers.

As the Minister responsible for energy, I am committed to exploring how the supply of natural gas can be extended to other areas in Northern Ireland. That would give consumers a greater choice of fuels and enhance the security of supply. That is evidenced by the ongoing joint work on the gas network study and by the establishment of a strategic gas network development group.

At the beginning of my response, I spoke about the timeliness of the debate given the development of a new strategic energy framework for Northern Ireland. It is an opportunity for all of us to contribute to putting in place the vision for meeting our prospective energy

needs. We often talk about the electricity grid infrastructure, but the extension of the gas network is a key element of our framework for the future, and I welcome the opportunity to speak about it this afternoon.

Adjourned at 6.24 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 18 January 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Resignations of Mrs Iris Robinson and Mrs Carmel Hanna

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that I have received a letter from Mrs Iris Robinson, dated 12 January 2010, advising me that she has resigned as a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly. I have also received a letter from Mrs Carmel Hanna, advising me of her resignation as a Member of the Assembly from 15 January 2010. I have notified the Chief Electoral Officer about both vacancies, in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

North/South Ministerial Council Plenary Meeting

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

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In compliance with section 52C(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we wish to make the following statement on the ninth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in plenary format, which was held in Limavady on Monday 14 December 2009. Our Ministers who attended the meeting have approved this report, and we make it on their behalf.

The Executive delegation was led by the First Minister, Peter Robinson MP MLA, and me, and we both chaired the meeting. In addition, the following Executive Ministers were in attendance: Sir Reg Empey, Minister for Employment and Learning; Conor Murphy, Minister for Regional Development; Margaret Ritchie, Minister for Social Development; Caitríona Ruane, Minister of Education; and OFMDFM junior Ministers Gerry Kelly and Robin Newton.

The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Brian Cowen TD. The Irish Government delegation comprised Mary Coughlan TD, Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment; Brian Lenihan TD, Minister for Finance; Noel Dempsey TD, Minister for Transport; Micheál Martin TD, Minister for Foreign Affairs; Éamon Ó Cuív TD, Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs; Brendan Smith TD, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; and Batt O'Keeffe TD, Minister of Education and Science.

During the meeting, we had a broad discussion with the Taoiseach and the Irish Government Ministers about the common economic challenges facing us. Ministers noted that the public finances in each jurisdiction were facing significant challenges. Against that background, we exchanged views on the respective measures that we are implementing to promote growth and protect employment and discussed the scope for future mutually beneficial co-operation in dealing with the economic downturn. We noted that the two Finance Ministers plan to meet in the new year.

We also discussed progress on the implementation of the north-west gateway initiative. Ministers noted the progress report submitted by the joint secretaries on the 15 NSMC meetings held since the last plenary meeting in July 2009 and welcomed the mutually

beneficial co-operation taken forward at those meetings and key developments, including continued progress on the A5 Aughnacloy to north-west gateway and the A8 Belfast to Larne road projects. Contractor/designers were appointed in early December 2009 for the A5 project. The Minister for Transport has made a €9 million payment to the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund in accordance with the agreed procedure.

Ministers also welcomed the reopening of the Belfast to Dublin rail line on 16 November 2009 and promotional efforts by the rail companies to recover passenger numbers; a discussion of the options for adopting a co-ordinated approach to the introduction of new, lower blood alcohol limits; the mutual recognition of driving disqualifications between the UK and Ireland, which will become operational in late January 2010; co-operation on planning and preparedness for dealing with the H1N1 virus, including the establishment of a well-functioning co-ordination structure; and progress in co-operation on child protection, including the exchange of information on Internet safety and social networking sites, research and knowledge transfer and steps towards establishing a joint protocol on children in care or on the child protection register who go missing and children moving across the border where there are concerns.

Ministers welcomed the commencement of a service-level agreement between the Health and Social Care Board for Northern Ireland and Our Lady's Children's Hospital in Crumlin to support the provision of paediatric congenital cardiac services and agreement for a framework relating, in the first instance, to the removal of illegally dumped waste at two priority sites: Slattinagh, County Fermanagh, and near Trillick, County Tyrone. That will form the basis for action on the remaining 18 sites. Work on those two sites is expected to commence early this year.

Ministers also welcomed discussion on the CAP health check agreement and the challenges facing the agriculture sector, in particular greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets and the dairy industry situation, and progress in the construction of new accommodation for the NSMC joint secretariat in Armagh and the decision to hold future NSMC meetings there, when practicable.

The Council welcomed the Irish Government's decision to lift the pause on capital funding for the Middletown Centre for Autism in County Armagh. It noted that the Minister of Education and Science and the Minister of Education propose to prepare an updated, phased multi-annual plan for the development of the centre, in conjunction with the board. That will take account of international best practice and the development of autism services on the island of Ireland since the centre was established. The Council looked forward to the commencement as soon as possible of

interim capital works on-site at Middletown consistent with the development plan.

The Council considered a paper on the St Andrews Agreement review and noted that the St Andrews Agreement provided for a review group to report with recommendations to the North/South Ministerial Council and that that review group intends to provide a final report to the next plenary. The Council noted the Northern Ireland Executive's ongoing review of the Civic Forum and notes paragraph 22 of the annex to the St Andrews Agreement. It noted that the Irish Government submitted their proposals to the Executive in September 2008 and that the Irish Government facilitated a consultative conference on 15 October 2009 with the participation of social partners and other civil society groups from across the island. The Council also agreed to bring to an early conclusion the discussions on the North/South consultative forum.

The Council noted that the establishment of a North/South parliamentary forum is a matter for the Oireachtas and the Northern Ireland Assembly respectively. Paragraph 21 of the annex to the St Andrews Agreement was noted, as was the proposal by the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly to hold a North/South parliamentary conference.

The Council considered and approved a schedule of NSMC meetings to take place in the new year and agreed that its next meeting in plenary format will be hosted by the Irish Government in June or July 2010. It noted that, where practicable, future NSMC meetings will be held in the new NSMC joint secretariat's accommodation in Armagh.

Mr Moutray: I thank the deputy First Minister for bringing the statement to the House. I welcome progress in co-operation on child protection, but will the deputy First Minister reassure the House that joint protocols with regard to children on the child protection register who go missing or move across the border are treated as a matter of urgency, considering the recent revelations regarding child abuse?

The deputy First Minister: Along with the Irish Government, the Executive have been proactive in recognising the real dangers that exist for children north and south of the border. We have been at the forefront of decisively pushing forward ongoing co-operation to ensure that we fulfil our duties and responsibilities in the protection of children, whether from the South or the North, who, on occasions, cross the border.

We have a responsibility to ensure that perpetrators of child abuse are consistently monitored by the Garda Síochána and the Police Service in the North. There is no doubt whatever that the work that we are engaged in is vital. There has been a huge debate around this issue in recent years. Ministers from north and south of

the border who attended the NSMC meeting in Limavady recognise that we have to continually challenge ourselves to see what more we can do to ensure the safety of children.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his statement.

The A5 Aughnacloy to Derry road is of strategic importance for the greater north-west, including Donegal. The campaigners who oppose the A5 road network established what was called a fighting fund and called the project a pipe dream. Will the Minister assure the Assembly that that campaign will not impact on the work that he has outlined today, which is already in place, and will he also give an assurance that that work will continue unabated?

The deputy First Minister: At the NSMC plenary meeting, we welcomed the good progress made on the A5 and A8 road projects. Development of the A5 project has been good, with the first key milestone, the completion of the preliminary route corridor assessment, achieved ahead of target. On 21 July last year, Ministers Murphy and Dempsey announced the preferred route. Progress remains good and on target to meet the next key milestone: the publication of the draft Orders later this year. Contractor designers were appointed in December 2009.

Importantly, in view of the debate on the economic situation North and South, the Irish Government have reaffirmed their commitment to the funding for both the A5 and A8 projects. A payment of €9 million, the first tranche of the Irish Government's contribution, was made in December last year.

Those are two vital road projects. The A8 runs along the eastern corridor. It is the road from Belfast to Larne, and it is critical to the road infrastructure. The road must be developed to match the quality of the roads that now exist in the South, particularly those that run from the border to Dublin.

It is imperative that the A5 road project go ahead. I understand that some landowners will have concerns, but they will have opportunities to make enquiries and raise those concerns. However, let nobody be in any doubt whatsoever that those two vital projects — the Belfast to Larne project and the Aughnacloy to the north-west gateway project — will go ahead. They are vital for us if we are to develop the economy and a road infrastructure that will allow us to attract inward investment.

12.15 pm

Mr McCallister: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. Does he accept that international best practice for dealing with children who have autism is early diagnosis and an individualised, predictable, structured and consistent programme? Does he

therefore accept that creating a centre for autism in an isolated location, on which we have already spent millions of pounds and which has thus far not delivered any outcomes for children, appears to be a politically rather than practically motivated decision? Does he agree that the centre is a waste of money?

The deputy First Minister: I hate to disagree with the Member, because it is not often that we disagree on such matters. The centre is a vital project. It is more than a political decision; it is a decision to establish what, hopefully, will be a centre of excellence for the education of children with autism. North and south of the border, we all understand that no section of the community is unaffected by the difficulties that families face in educating children who have autism. International best practice clearly shows that there are many different ways of treating children who have autism. Given the varying needs of children in the education system, there is no one way to treat them.

It is vital that there be a centre of excellence that can examine all those different methods and examine how autism is being dealt with in other parts of the world, such as the US, New Zealand, Australia and Sweden. The project has been stalled, and I am as unhappy as anybody else about the slow pace of progress, particularly because the centre was given the green light when I was the Minister of Education some — who would believe it? — 10 years ago. It is important that that project move on. The centre will be good for children, because it will be able to consider international best practice and how the varying methods available can ensure that our children are treated on the basis of equality and are given every opportunity to fulfil their potential in the education system.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the progress report, the money for the A5 project and the progress that has been made on the mutual recognition of driving disqualifications. However, there is something that I cannot welcome. When the deputy First Minister last reported in the Chamber on an NSMC meeting, he said that the St Andrews Agreement review was to be signed off at the December meeting. In today's report, we learn that that is not the case, despite the fact that a clear commitment was given. Will the deputy First Minister explain why that review of North/South implementation bodies and areas for co-operation was not signed off in December? Given that that report will not now be discussed until June, will he reassure the Chamber that its recommendations will be acted on quickly? By that stage, it will be three years since restoration, and, given the way in which the matter has been handled, it may be four, five or more years before the North and the South expand in the way in which so many people on the island believe that they should.

The deputy First Minister: The St Andrews Agreement review formed part of the discussions at

the most recent NSMC meeting in Limavady. The Council noted that the St Andrews Agreement provided for a review group to report with recommendations to the North/South Ministerial Council and that the review group intends to provide a final report at the next plenary meeting. Any changes to the existing arrangements would require the endorsement of the Assembly and the Oireachtas.

The Member mentioned the delay of the review. The review group has not yet finalised its consideration of the report of the experts and advisers on the efficiency and value for money of the existing implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd or of the other elements of the terms of reference of the review. The review group intends to provide a final report at the next NSMC plenary meeting.

I am under no illusions whatsoever that, in asking the question, the Member knows fine rightly what the answer is and knows that, in the context of this situation, I am not going to give him the sort of answer that he hopes I will. We know that such things have to be agreed in the North and between the North and the South. We are endeavouring to expedite the matter, and it is unfortunate that that will have to wait until the next NSMC meeting. However, that is the way of the institutions that we are part of. I have no doubt whatsoever that, if the Member were standing in my position, he would have to give the same answer.

Mrs Long: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement, in which he referred to the progress report that was submitted by the joint secretaries. I want to ask about the Belfast to Dublin railway line. Will the deputy First Minister outline what specific co-operation has been ongoing between the two Governments in respect of, for example, the issues that were raised regarding structural assessments of critical infrastructure on a cross-border basis? Will he also outline any work that is ongoing to address the decline in passenger numbers and passenger confidence following the incident on the line?

The deputy First Minister: The reports of increased passenger numbers are very encouraging, and the reports that we have received in recent weeks clearly indicate that, through enticements, people are coming back to the service. That is tremendous news. We were all mightily relieved that the collapse of the bridge at Malahide did not result in a much more serious situation, with the possible loss of life. The speed with which the authorities in the South moved to repair the bridge is absolutely commendable. All we can do is welcome the successful repair of the bridge at Malahide and the reopening of the cross-border railway line.

With a full Enterprise train service having been resumed between Belfast and Dublin and the old

timetable essentially restored, our priority has to be to restore confidence in the service. I understand that the offers of discounted fares that Iarnród Éireann and Translink made available to encourage passengers back onto the Enterprise service are proving successful, and that is very good. We need to make sure that the Enterprise service is safe, comfortable and reliable. I am aware of the plans that are being discussed by both rail companies to improve the reliability and fuel efficiency of the trains. It is important that we consider those plans, including any further costs. Essentially, those are matters for the NSMC meeting in transport sectoral format, which will take place very soon.

Mr Shannon: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement to the Chamber.

Last week, I asked Arlene Foster, in her position as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, how we could realise the tourism potential of people from the Republic of Ireland coming to Northern Ireland to do their shopping. I know that the deputy First Minister is one who would encourage those people to do as much shopping up here as they can. In her answer, the Minister said that that had tourism potential. I am very conscious of what the deputy First Minister said in his statement about the Belfast to Dublin railway line. From the point of view of tourism, will he, along with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, encourage more people to take advantage of the line and to spend more money in Northern Ireland? That would ensure an increase in the number of passengers using the service.

In relation to swine flu —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to finish his question.

Mr Shannon: There has been an interest in the reduction in the incidence of swine flu. Will the deputy First Minister tell me whether there has been face-to-face contact between the Health Departments in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to exchange information on how best to address the swine flu epidemic?

The deputy First Minister: The Member and I are singing from the same hymn sheet when it comes to encouraging as many people as possible to visit, particularly tourists. There is no doubt that we had an interesting debate with some politicians in Dublin last year whom I described publicly as being very partitionist in their approach because they were arguing that people should not come to the North and should spend their money in Dublin.

People take their own decisions, and, last year, there were a number of examples of people deciding to travel to Newry, Enniskillen, Banbridge, Derry and many other parts of the North to do their shopping, which we

welcome. I join the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in continuing to encourage people to come to the North, not just because of the shopping experience but because the more people who travel between the North and South, the better the situation will be for building relations. That is a good thing.

Encouraging people to use public transport is of critical importance to tackling climate change, which presents massive difficulties for all of us on the planet. Moving forward, we should be encouraging people to use the Dublin to Belfast train. The Minister for Regional Development, with the relevant Minister in the South, has further plans that will enable us to continue to ensure that we provide an excellent service for passengers.

We are pleased to note the degree of close co-operation between the two jurisdictions and the similarity of their approaches in response to the recent swine flu outbreak. There has been considerable contact between health officials and Ministers since the outbreak began. It is vital that we maintain that close co-operation. Measures to counteract the effects of the virus in one part of the island will be less effective if there are not equally effective measures in place in the other part.

I take the opportunity to sympathise with the 16 families who have lost loved ones due to swine flu-related deaths. I am satisfied that our Health Minister and the Minister for Health and Children in Dublin, along with their respective Departments, are in constant contact. We recognise that we are joined in a common cause to ensure that the disease does not take further lives.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá ceist agam don LeasChéad Aire. Given the real impact that the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) will have on the economy of the North, will the deputy First Minister provide an update on discussions that have been held on the matter with Minister Brian Lenihan? I take the opportunity to wish Minister Lenihan well in overcoming his illness.

With regard to shoppers coming North, perhaps the deputy First Minister could highlight at the next NSMC meeting that Omagh, the county town of Tyrone, is very euro-friendly.

The deputy First Minister: The Member never fails to represent West Tyrone, which is highly commendable. I think that the entire House will join him in wishing Brian Lenihan well in his health battle. Minister Lenihan and his family are experiencing very difficult circumstances, and no doubt the good wishes of everybody in the House go to them.

Our Finance Minister, Sammy Wilson, met Brian Lenihan in September and mid-November to discuss NAMA and related banking issues. At the first

meeting, Minister Lenihan indicated that the value of locally based loans likely to be transferred to NAMA would total €4.8 billion, which was much lower than earlier estimates of around €20 billion. However, even €4.8 billion of local asset exposure has considerable implications for our economy. Minister Lenihan again provided an assurance that it was in nobody's interest to undertake a fire sale of assets in the North and that the loans exposed would have to be carefully managed.

Minister Lenihan indicated that it would not be possible to expand NAMA's seven-person board to include a representative from the North. However, he indicated that the Department of Finance and Personnel could communicate to NAMA through an advisory committee, which would report directly to the board. Minister Lenihan agreed that the advisory committee working to the NAMA board should have some form of direct line of communication to DFP on the management of the assets from the North. DFP officials are liaising with their Dublin counterparts to finalise those arrangements.

12.30 pm

Minister Wilson had hoped to meet Minister Lenihan at the end of January to discuss the latest position on NAMA. Unfortunately, that meeting has been postponed, and Minister Wilson has sought a rescheduled meeting for mid-February. However, that has not yet been confirmed; we all know the reasons why. At that meeting, the two Ministers will review progress on the establishment of NAMA and the state of stability in the participating banks. Ministers will also discuss formalising Northern representation and the latest estimates of local exposure to loans or debts that will transfer to NAMA. In the interim, officials from both Departments will continue to engage.

Mr Spratt: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement, and I welcome the fact that it referenced several road safety issues. Over the Christmas period, the two police services engaged in a road safety campaign to reduce the number of deaths caused by drink-driving. I welcome the fact that there have been discussions on an approach to introduce lower blood:alcohol limits. Will the deputy First Minister explain what adopting a co-ordinated approach actually means? Furthermore, the issue of driving disqualifications has been a problem for decades. Given that the scheme of mutual recognition will become operational in late January, will the deputy First Minister outline the implications? Will it require the Dáil and the Assembly to pass legislation?

The deputy First Minister: Road safety is always a major item on the agenda of NSMC meetings. There has undoubtedly been a downward trend in road casualties over the past 30 years. As recently as 2000, 171 people were killed on our roads. However, that

figure steadily declined to 107 deaths in 2008, which is the lowest here since records began in 1931. Regrettably, as experience has shown, road deaths may increase in some years. For example, 115 people lost their lives last year, compared with 107 in 2008. That represents a 7% increase. Last year, four children died; that is a reduction from seven deaths in 2008.

In the next few months, the Minister of the Environment will consult on the development of a new road safety strategy for the North. It will be introduced before the end of 2010, two years before the expiry of the existing strategy, and the consultation will include challenging new casualty-reduction targets, which will provide the necessary focus to achieve further significant reductions in road deaths and serious injuries over the coming years. A number of road safety research projects are nearing completion and will help to inform the development of the new strategy.

The agreement on mutual recognition of driving disqualifications has now been reached, and declarations have been made to the European Commission for the implementation of a bilateral agreement between Britain and Ireland, which will come into operation on 28 January. It will be necessary to take account of the lessons that were learned through the implementation of the mutual recognition of disqualifications when planning for the mutual recognition of penalty points. I understand that a project plan will be developed to pursue the mutual recognition of penalty points, which will be a complex and longer-term process because it affects many more motorists and the penalty point systems differ in each jurisdiction.

The issue of blood:alcohol limits was discussed at the NMSC meeting in transport sectoral format that was held in Dublin on 4 November 2009. I understand that Ministers noted the background and the current position on new lower drink-driving limits in both jurisdictions and agreed that efforts to deliver a co-ordinated approach to the introduction of new limits should continue.

Therefore, all those issues are being taken seriously. The increase in road deaths and other deaths is absolutely unacceptable. There is a tremendous recognition that we and the Government in Dublin must continue to work together to ensure that we are doing everything possible to preserve life on the roads.

Mr McFarland: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. He said that delegates discussed the scope for future mutually beneficial co-operation to deal with the economic downturn. Does he agree that the decision in the recent Budget in the Republic to reduce VAT and excise duties on alcohol will have a negative effect on cross-border shopping and the Northern Ireland economy? What conclusions has he

drawn from that new approach by the Republic's Government?

The deputy First Minister: Without being too political, I suppose that people in government in Dublin have come under pressure from the business community. It was quite clear in the run-up to that recent Budget that a lot of pressure was being applied and that there was concern about the number of people who were travelling to the North. Whatever decision the Dublin Government take on VAT and lower alcohol prices is a matter for that Government. The question for us is whether people are still coming to shop, and all the evidence shows that they are continuing to do so consistently.

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

Our approach should not depend on what happens south of the border on the lowering of alcohol prices or the reduction in VAT. We must try to present shoppers all over the island with the opportunity to come and spend money here and, in doing so, to save on their household budgets. It is clear that the recent Budget and the issues that the Member raises do not seem to have put people off.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. I want to ask him about the North/South parliamentary forum. Paragraph 13 of his statement says a good deal about noting and discussing but says nothing at all about outcomes. Will the First Minister and deputy First Minister confirm that they support, in principle, the establishment of a North/South parliamentary forum? Furthermore, will the deputy First Minister confirm that there is no reason why the Oireachtas and the Assembly should not move quickly to create the forum and put it in place?

The deputy First Minister: In Limavady, the Council noted that the establishment of such a forum is a matter for the Oireachtas and the Assembly respectively. It also noted paragraph 21 of the annex to the St Andrews Agreement and the proposal by the Speaker of the Assembly to hold a North/South parliamentary conference. Two working groups have been established to develop proposals for the forum, one in the Oireachtas and one in the Assembly.

The Houses of the Oireachtas Commission and the Assembly Commission held a joint meeting on 18 November 2009 to discuss issues of mutual interest to both Commissions. During the discussions, our Speaker, William Hay, proposed the holding of a North/South parliamentary conference. That proposal was welcomed by the Ceann Comhairle, and it was agreed to progress the matter through the two working groups that were established by both institutions. I understand that a meeting of officials from the Houses of the Oireachtas and the Assembly has been scheduled for 5

February 2010 to discuss the arrangements for a North/South parliamentary conference.

The Member knows where we are coming from on this issue. We want further progress. Officials have been charged with taking forward important work. It is a matter for the Assembly and the Oireachtas, and I hope that we will make important progress on that matter before the next plenary meeting of the NSMC.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. I want to follow up on Mr Spratt's question about recognition of driving disqualifications. There seems to have been a high number of deaths in the border areas as a result of road accidents, many of which have been caused by drink-driving.

Will the deputy First Minister tell us how much closer we are to having an all-Ireland recognition of the blood:alcohol limit? How much closer are we to achieving a common all-island structure on signage in the border areas? Some signs show kilometres an hour and others show miles an hour.

The deputy First Minister: Those issues were discussed at the NSMC meeting in transport sectoral format in Dublin on 4 November 2009. Ministers Edwin Poots and Conor Murphy, as well as Noel Dempsey TD, attended that meeting. I understand that both member states recently made a declaration to the EU on the bilateral application of the 1998 EU Convention on Driving Disqualifications. That means that mutual recognition of driving disqualifications will be operational in late January.

I understand that Ministers noted the background to and current position on new lower drink-driving limits in both jurisdictions and agreed that efforts to deliver a co-ordinated approach to the introduction of new blood:alcohol limits should continue. That is important work.

The issue of signage is much more complicated. I have no doubt that, if it is decided that signage creates a problem in people's attitude to speed, Ministers will come forward with a solution. However, I do not wish to pre-empt discussions between Ministers who have a responsibility to take that work forward. As I speak, I do not know what impact signage has on speed. I would like to hear the views of both Ministers as to whether they believe that speed contributes to the increase in road traffic accidents.

Mr G Robinson: I hope that those who attended the meeting enjoyed their visit to Limavady, which is in my constituency. Will the deputy First Minister outline whether there are any plans to introduce multi-night rail-return offers to enhance passenger numbers for the benefit of Northern Ireland's tourist industry?

The deputy First Minister: I do not have any information about that offhand, but I will speak to the

relevant Ministers and endeavour to answer the Member. I confirm that all Ministers from Dublin and from here who attended the meeting at Limavady thought that the facilities were first class. Limavady is a beautiful part of the north-west of the island, and everybody enjoyed being there that day.

Mr B McCrea: The deputy First Minister is in a relaxed, perhaps even benign, mood today. Will he indulge me with an answer to a question on the St Andrews Agreement review? He will be aware that not every party in this place is entirely happy with the way that the Executive are working. Will he outline who sits on the review group and whether the paper that they are working on will be brought to the Assembly for discussion? As far as I am aware, at least two of the parties feel that they are being excluded, and that is part of the issue.

The deputy First Minister: There is no intention whatsoever to exclude anybody. We are all aware, particularly where the St Andrews Agreement review is concerned, that all matters that relate to how we conduct our business go back to the Oireachtas and to the Assembly.

A group of senior officials and an advisory panel of four experts and advisers is taking the review forward. They have met separately with each of the six North/South implementation bodies and with Tourism Ireland Ltd, the sponsor Departments, the bodies' key stakeholders and the social partners. The expert advisers have completed their task of examining the value for money and effectiveness of the existing bodies, and they have submitted their report to the review group.

Given the day and the week that are in it, we all recognise that we have come to a fundamental point in the work of these institutions. Great efforts are being made on all sides to try to reach agreements that will see us move forward in a different mode from that which has existed since the institutions that we are a part of were established two-and-a-half years ago.

12.45 pm

However, everyone has to be fair. There is not much point in the Member standing up at this meeting of the Assembly and talking about parties being excluded. I do not say this to score political points, but, since the establishment of the institutions, some parties that are members of the Executive have tried to adopt the approach of being both in government and very critical of government. Co-operation is a two-way street, and there is responsibility on all of us. I have met Sir Reg Empey on a number of occasions over the last couple of weeks. I have met Mark Durkan, and the Acting First Minister, Arlene Foster, has also been involved in meetings.

We have to strive to do things better. I hope that, as a result of our ongoing deliberations, we will reach agreements that will see us move forward in a spirit of inclusiveness and on the basis of equality and partnership. At the end of the day, the process is about delivering for our community. Members will note that I am not talking about both sections of the community, or the people who vote for the Ulster Unionists, or the people who vote for the SDLP, or the people who vote for the DUP or the people who vote for Sinn Féin. It is about delivering for our community and all our people. There is a real opportunity to move forward in a way that will address some of the concerns that the Member expressed in his question.

Mr Dallat: I, too, welcome the statement. I am particularly pleased to hear that the deputy First Minister had a really good time in Limavady, because that did not come across particularly well at the press conference after the meeting.

I welcome the emphasis that was placed on road and rail transport. Will the deputy First Minister assure us that the discussion about the Belfast to Dublin Enterprise service was not entirely about promotional efforts to restore confidence and that it dealt with the need for an integrated rail transport network across the island? If, as I suspect, the discussion did not go that far, will he assure us that that will be a subject of future meetings? I have a particular interest in the Belfast to Derry service, on which there has been an astonishing increase in passenger numbers as a result of capital investment.

The deputy First Minister: We all understand that, as we move forward, we will be challenged by the environmental circumstances that affect people in the North and South. We all know how the processes work. There must be agreement among the parties here in the North on how we intend to take the matter forward. Some people might have differing views, but there is no doubt that all the political parties in the Assembly recognise that we need to do whatever we can to get people out of private cars and onto public transport. I very much concur with that sentiment. It is vital to our environment and to the free movement of traffic that we get as many cars off the roads as possible and encourage people to use trains and buses.

There was an important debate in the north-west about the poor service that runs between Belfast and Derry or, as Gregory Campbell might call it, Londonderry. However, the Government here in the North moved decisively to bring about positive changes in recent times, which, as the Member articulated, have led to an increase in the number of people who use that service. That proves that much can be done to get cars off the roads and to encourage people to use trains and buses. It represents a challenge for us on the island of Ireland, but, primarily, it is the

responsibility of our Government in the North and the Government in the South to agree on ways to take the work forward.

I look forward to engaging with the relevant Departments on what is, undoubtedly, vital work.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement.

I think that Professor Snaith told the Committee for Regional Development that we needed to spend £108 million on our rural roads. We now know that only £85 million will be spent. That means that less will be spent on rural roads, on which 70% of our accidents happen. Did the Minister raise that at the meeting?

As the Environment Committee has noted, the one area in which we are not going to achieve the 2025 emissions target is vehicles. Did the Minister raise that subject at the meeting?

The deputy First Minister: Obviously, the environmental situation forms a major part of the responsibility of Ministers North and South. The undoubted challenges that the emissions levels present for us all shows that there is still a considerable amount of work to do.

The funding of rural roads did not form part of the discussions at the NSMC. The work of the NSMC is principally to deal with issues on an all-island basis. The amount of money that is spent on rural roads is a matter primarily for the Executive and the Minister for Regional Development. I will endeavour to get that Minister to correspond with the Member on that matter.

North/South Ministerial Council

Education Sectoral Format

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has 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.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Le do chhead, a Cheann Comhairle, ba mhian liom ráiteas a thabhairt maidir le oideachais. Tionóladh an cruinniú seo i mBaile Átha Cliath ar 25 Samhain 2009.

With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement regarding a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format. The meeting was held in Dublin on 25 November 2009. I represented the Executive, as Minister of Education, along with the Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey. The Irish Government were represented by Batt O’Keefe, Minister for Education and Science. This statement has been agreed with Sir Reg Empey and is made on behalf of us both. I will summarise the main points from the meeting, which ranged across all the agreed areas of education co-operation.

Thug an Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas dá h-aire an dul chun cinn a rinneadh ar roinnt réimsí maidir le tearcghnóthachtáil oideachasúil, lena n-áirítear obair ar chomhfhoilseachán ar dhea-chleachtas i dteagasc na litearthachta agus na huimhearthachta i scoileanna i limistéir faoi mhíbhuntáiste, socruithe le haghaidh comhdhála comhpháirtí ar uimhearthacht a thionólfar i mí Feabhra 2010 agus obair laistigh den Tascfhórsa ar Oideachas don Lucht Siúil.

The North/South Ministerial Council noted the progress that has been made in a number of areas in relation to educational underachievement, including work on a joint publication on best practice in the teaching of literacy and numeracy in schools in disadvantaged areas, arrangements for a joint conference on numeracy to be held in February 2010 and work in the task force on Traveller education. We agreed that the focus of an all-island children’s book week, which is to be held in 2010, should be primarily on children who have little or no tradition of reading at home, those who have little access to reading materials and those who are at risk of falling behind.

Chuir an Chomhairle fáilte roimh an idirchaidreamh níos fearr idir na seirbhísí forbartha gairmiúla do mhúinteoirí sa dá dhlínse a bhaineann le hoideachas inseirbhíse do mhúinteoirí Gaelscolaíochta agus tá an Chomhairle ag tnúth le tuarascáil a fháil ag an gcéad chruinniú eile ar an dul chun cinn. Chuir muid fáilte roimh an dul chun cinn atá déanta ar athbhunú ghrúpa

oibre le hiniúchadh a dhéanamh ar chomhoibriú ar cheisteanna a bhaineann le hoideachas múinteoirí i gcoitinne.

The Council welcomed the closer liaison among the professional development services for teachers in both jurisdictions relating to in-service education for teachers in Irish-medium education. It looks forward to receiving a report on progress at the next meeting. We also welcomed the progress on reconstituting a working group to examine co-operation on teacher education issues in general.

We noted that further exchanges aimed at supporting the continuing development of inspection practice in both parts of the island are planned for the 2009-2010 school year between the inspectorates of both Departments of Education.

The Council welcomed a presentation by the co-chairs of the Standing Committee on Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS) outlining its teacher education work, and noted the report of the recent 2009 annual conference.

We noted that measures are being taken to provide information on pension issues for teachers who wish to transfer to work in the other jurisdiction.

In relation to special education needs, chuir an Chomhairle fáilte roimh an dul chun cinn leanúnach ar na seirbhísí atá ar fáil ag Ionad Uathachais Choillidh Chanannáin. Thug muid dár n-aire agus thacaigh muid leis an athbhreithniú leanúnach atá á dhéanamh ag an dá Roinn, agus an chumarsáid eatarthu, maidir leis an staid reatha ag Ionad Choillidh Chanannáin.

The Council welcomed the continuing progress of services available at the Middletown Centre for Autism. We noted and supported the ongoing active review by, and communication between, the Departments on the current situation at the centre. We also noted and welcomed the success of the autistic spectrum disorders conference on “Enabling Communication” that was held on 13 November 2009.

On the issue of school youth and teacher exchanges, thug an Chomhairle dá h-aire an dul chun cinn atá déanta go dtí seo maidir le creatlach a fhorbairt i gcomhair comhchláir do bhainistiú agus chistiú malairtí oideachais Thuaidh/Theas san am atá le teacht.

The Council noted the progress made to date in developing a framework for a proposed joint programme for the future management and funding of North/South educational exchanges. We welcomed and thanked the European Studies project for its presentation on its activities, achievements and future plans. The project’s aim is to encourage co-operation between participating students and staff, and to contribute to educational development in the wider European Union dimension through informing students

about current national and European social, economic and political issues and structures.

Ar deireadh, shocraigh muid gur chóir an chéad chruinniú eile den Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh Theas i bhformáid na hearnála oideachais a thionól in earrach nab liana 2010.

We agreed that the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format should be in spring 2010.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): I note the Minister's reference to the North/South progress about educational underachievement, particularly on the issue of numeracy. However, it is three years since work started on the revised literacy and numeracy strategy for Northern Ireland. Will the Minister inform the House why there is a delay in producing that important, long-awaited strategy? Precisely when will it be brought to the Education Committee to be made available to the House? Is it not a sad reflection on the Minister that the best that she could bring to the House in relation to a meeting with her counterparts in the Irish Republic is a conference and a book? More must be done.

I also note the Minister's reference in the statement to:

"progress of services available at the Middletown Centre for Autism."

I remind the House that the Minister's press release on 14 December 2009 stated:

"an updated plan for future development of the Middletown Autism Centre will go ahead as soon as possible."

Bearing in mind that a considerable sum from the Northern Ireland purse has been expended on the project since 2002, will the Minister today inform the House precisely when the assessment centre in Middletown will be fully operational? It is typical of the Minister of Education to come to the House with a paper that is of little substance or style and that contains nothing other than "we hope", "we wish", and "we long for".

I conclude with a question: given that the Minister of Education in Northern Ireland is so keen on equality of treatment, did she ask the Minister of Education and Science in the Irish Republic about the discrimination in which his Department is engaged in respect of Protestant schools there?

1.00 pm

The Minister of Education: The Member asked a couple of questions, and I will answer them. First, I welcome the Member's interest in literacy, numeracy and underachievement. He will know that I have brought forward a wide range of interconnected policies to make sure that the education system in the North of Ireland deals with the high levels of underachievement due to its selective nature and due to the focus in the

past on how resources were allocated. Thankfully, we are in a new era; we have the transfer 2010 policy, and there is an enormous focus on literacy and numeracy. The Member will be delighted to hear that literacy and numeracy are among the key issues on the agenda at every North/South Ministerial Council meeting in education sectoral format.

Since becoming the Minister of Education, I have made it a priority to tackle underachievement and to promote the raising of standards and equality in all schools for all children, not just for some. As I said, my work through the North/South Ministerial Council supports those efforts. The challenges that our disadvantaged communities face are considerable, and, when there is intergenerational educational disadvantage, research shows the powerful impact that parental involvement has on children's education. I hope that the Member is not belittling very important moves such as the reading initiative, because anybody who knows anything about education understands the absolute importance of parental involvement in children learning to read from a very early age.
[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: I pay tribute to people across the island who have been working on various initiatives. I attended a very good conference in County Cavan on teaching numeracy and mathematics by making it interesting and stimulating. The conference focused on primary schools. Last week, I had a very good meeting with the Literacy and Numeracy Task Force, and I put on record my thanks for the work that it has done.

I welcome the Member's belated interest in the Middletown Centre for Autism. To update the House, I can confirm that the Southern Government have lifted the pause in additional funding for the centre. I warmly welcome that move, because I made representations on that. The Middletown Centre for Autism is a ground-breaking initiative that has the potential to greatly improve the lives of children with autism — north, south, east and west of the island. In addition, my officials are looking at a new development programme for the centre, and, to make that project work — it is a very good one — they will continue to work closely with their counterparts in the Department of Education and Science in Dublin.

I am not from the school of thought that believes that everything needs to be situated in Belfast or Dublin. I believe that it is important to spread institutions of excellence across the island. Earlier, we heard about rural roads, but it is also important that we support rural communities and communities outside Belfast and Dublin.

As for the Member's question about Protestant schools, I asked the Minister of Education and Science in the South for an update. I raised the matter with him in person, and I wrote to him. At the appropriate time, I will forward details of his response to the Cathaoirleach.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is good to hear a DUP Member suggesting that we need more all-Ireland co-operation and more substance to all-Ireland meetings. I welcome that new approach from the Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Turning to the Minister's statement, how will the all-Ireland book week, including the project to encourage children to read at home and their parents and guardians to read to them, be advanced? Does the Minister agree that it is vital for educational advancement that children be encouraged to move away from television and to read books at home?

The Minister of Education: Aontaim leat. I absolutely agree. The reading of books needs to start from a very early age, with toddlers and their parents looking at pictures, so that they understand that reading is very important and they get into the habit of reading.

Recently, Andy McMorran, who is a member of the Literacy and Numeracy Task Force, was talking about the importance that his post-primary school places on making the issue of literacy a whole-school project, not just for the key subjects of English or Irish but as part and parcel of the entire school; every teacher has a responsibility for it. We also talked about the importance of mathematics and ensuring that it is seen as fun and innovative. It is important that all our young people get those opportunities.

Our officials are working with officials in the South of Ireland to organise a very good children's book week. I will forward information on the book week to all Members as soon as it is available.

Mr B McCrea: I rise reluctantly, because I have been bored to tears by the last intervention. Does the Minister believe that educational underachievement is a cross-cutting matter that involves many Departments? Will she give an undertaking to bring these matters to the Assembly having run the issues past her Executive colleagues? I would like a firm undertaking that she will do that.

Since we are talking about reading, what is the most recent book that the Minister bought?

The Minister of Education: I note the damning statement that the Ulster Unionist Party's education spokesperson was bored when I was talking about literacy and numeracy. The Member has questions to ask himself about that.

In relation to educational underachievement being a cross-cutting matter, I respectfully suggest that the Member go to his party leader and ask him about the number of times that we have worked very well together on the promotion of STEM subjects and on careers. Perhaps the Ulster Unionist Party's education spokesperson should take a leaf out of his party leader's book.

Talking of books. I recently was given a present of the 'The Secret Scripture' by Sebastian Barry. It is a wonderful book, and I urge the Member to read it. I am an avid reader and, over Christmas, I bought five or six books with me to Achill Island and had a lovely couple of days reading them.

With regard to STEM subjects, on Friday, I visited the BT Young Scientists and Technology Exhibition in Dublin to see the wide range of fascinating subjects on show. I will take this opportunity to congratulate our schools from the North of Ireland. A total of 1,586 projects were submitted from across Ireland, and 520 have qualified to compete in the finals. In the North, we have seen a 66% rise in entries, with 42 projects from 23 schools making it through to the final. I congratulate all who took part in it. I attended the awards ceremony on Friday night, and many of our schools across the sectors achieved awards: Wallace High School; St Mary's High School, Newry; Oakgrove Integrated College; St Louis Grammar School, Kilkeel; and RBAI in Belfast. Abbey Christian Brothers' Grammar in Newry and Loreto College in Coleraine won two of the top four prizes, which is phenomenal. The North of Ireland can be very proud of the young people who travelled to Dublin and won all sorts of awards.

Mr Dallat: The Minister referred to a book week. I congratulate her on that initiative. Does she agree that it is wrong that the Library Service is threatening to close many libraries in working-class areas, where people cannot afford to buy books? Will she use her influence to ensure that that systematic culling of libraries is put to an end?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, that question did not relate to your statement. If you wish to answer the question, you may. If not, we will move on.

The Minister of Education: I would rather answer it, albeit in a generic way. As Members will know, the Library Service is not under my authority. However, I believe that libraries play an important role in society, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her statement. She referred to the progress that is being made to tackle educational underachievement in the North and in the South and to the work of the Literacy and Numeracy Task Force. Have any of the bodies that are involved managed to come up with a clear definition

of educational underachievement? Is that one of the objectives of North/South discussions?

The Minister of Education: I will forward to the Chairperson of the Committee for Education the interim report that has been produced by the Literacy and Numeracy Task Force. I will also ensure that all Members receive copies at the appropriate time. I will also bring to the task force's attention the question that the Member has asked about a definition of educational underachievement.

At present, I operate towards the objective that all young people leave school with adequate qualifications, because that is particularly important. I accept that qualifications are not the only means by which literacy and numeracy are measured, because different children and young people have different needs and aspirations. However, by and large, I want the vast majority of young people to leave school with GCSEs, particularly in English or Irish, and mathematics. GCSEs in those subjects are key to literacy and numeracy.

Mr Ross: The Minister will know that educational underachievement manifests itself during the earliest years of a child's life. Will she provide more detail on initiatives to tackle underachievement that she may have discussed with her counterpart at the North/South meeting? Will she tell the House whether she will identify areas in Northern Ireland where educational underachievement is a particular difficulty and whether she will target resources and pilot initiatives in those areas?

The Minister of Education: As I stated earlier, during the past number of years, there has been a great deal of North/South focus on literacy and numeracy. One good example is the major international conference that was held when Mary Hanafin was the Minister of Education and Science in the South. International experts came from all the OECD countries. As part of the conference, workshops were held to look at literacy and numeracy, how to share best practice and how to assess children and young people — not just the high achievers, on whom, in many cases, the system focused in the past. The conference focused on how to place young people at the centre of the education system, rather than institutions.

All the discussions that have taken place at every North/South meeting have, as I have said, focused on literacy and numeracy. In one case, young people from some of the highest-achieving schools were brought to address the North/South Ministerial Council. That was one of the most innovative meetings that we have held.

We have also focused on specific groups, such as newcomer children. We looked at schools in various parts of the South and the North that are doing well to integrate those children while respecting diversity. We have also looked specifically at Traveller children,

who are some of the most disadvantaged throughout the island of Ireland. We held conferences to focus specifically on them.

1.15 pm

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. She referred to special educational needs and stated that that issue is always on the agenda of NSMC meetings in education sectoral format. The 31 January deadline for the SEN and inclusion review is fast approaching. Does the Minister agree that we need to do all that we can to ensure that people respond to that consultation and make sure that their voices are heard so that we can achieve the best outcome for those with special educational needs?

The Minister of Education: Aontaím leat, a Michelle. Ceapaim go bhfuil sé an-tábhachtach go dtugaimid tacaíocht do na páistí sin a bhfuil riachtanais speisialta acu.

I agree with Michelle O'Neill. That is a very important consultation, and it is possible that it will bring significant changes to our education system. It is about putting the child at the centre and providing an individual education plan, rather than fitting his or her needs around institutional needs. I urge parents, teachers, classroom assistants and educationalists to make the most of the extension to the consultation period. We have received a large number of responses, and I look forward to receiving more. I urge Members to use their good offices to encourage people to respond to that consultation.

Mr Craig: I noted with interest the Minister's comments about the Middletown Centre for Autism and her support for the ongoing review. Will the Minister outline the guidelines for that review? More importantly, will she inform us when the review will be completed? There is a growing concern in autism groups that the centre is delivering little or nothing for the needs of those who suffer from autism.

The Minister of Education: The Middletown Centre for Autism is a valuable asset. It is carrying out world-class work and looking at international best practice. It is important that we on the island of Ireland work together to look at the important issue of autism. My officials are working closely with officials in the South of Ireland in developing the programme for the centre and will continue to do so. At the appropriate moment, I will update the House and the Education Committee on that.

Mr McCallister: Do teachers from Northern Ireland continue to be discriminated against when seeking employment in the Republic? When does the Minister hope to rectify that?

The Minister of Education: Teachers from the North of Ireland are not being discriminated against in the South of Ireland. Further to discussion between the General Teaching Council here and the Teaching Council in the South, arrangements are in place whereby the General Teaching Council, as part of its annual presentations to all postgraduate certificate of education and final year Bachelor of Education students, includes information about the role of the Teaching Council and what students here are required to do if they wish to teach in the primary or post-primary sectors in the South of Ireland.

Teachers from here who wish to teach in the primary sector in the South but do not hold the requisite Irish language qualification — an scrúdú le haghaidh cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge — are granted provisional recognition as a teacher by the Department of Education and Science and are allowed five years to acquire the qualification. On attainment of the qualification, such teachers are 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. In the case of post-primary schools, the Irish language requirement applies only to teachers employed in Gaeltacht schools, Irish-medium schools and to those who teach any subject through the medium of Irish.

I am sure that the Member would not expect teachers in the North to teach in a language unless they spoke that language. That requirement is important in primary schools, because Irish is the first language of Ireland, and it is important that teachers have a working knowledge of the language and are able to speak it before teaching it as part of the curriculum.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister detail some of the services that are available in the Middletown Centre for Autism? When will children with autism be able to avail themselves of those services?

The Minister of Education: I will provide an update on the Middletown centre. Funding for the purchase and running costs of the centre have been provided on a 50:50 basis by the Department of Education and the Department of Education and Science in the South. The Department of Education spent £1.5 million to purchase the property. The purchase cost was based on an evaluation by the then Valuation and Lands Agency. The annual running costs of the centre have been estimated at approximately £3.5 million per annum, which will be shared equally between the two Departments. The Department of Education's expenditure on the project currently stands at approximately £1.88 million revenue, £1.737 million capital and £374,000 project costs from 2001 to date.

Already, the centre provides a training and advisory service for parents, teachers and other professionals

and a research and information service. It is planned that the centre will provide two further services: an education assessment service and a learning support service. We are delighted to say that the Southern Government have lifted the pause in additional funding for the centre, which, as Members will know, happened at the meeting in Limavady.

British-Irish Council: Ministerial Meeting

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has received notice from the Minister for Social Development that she wishes to make a statement on the British-Irish Council (BIC) ministerial meeting.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): In compliance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following report on the inaugural meeting of the British-Irish Council housing work stream, which was held in Newcastle, County Down, on 4 December 2009. The report has been agreed by and is being made on behalf of Edwin Poots MLA, Minister of the Environment, who accompanied me at the meeting.

The British-Irish Council identified housing as a new work sector at its summit in Cardiff in February last year. Because of the good work that we are doing in Northern Ireland in housing and the fact that we are pioneers in financial innovation, I was asked to lead this important new work sector. All eight member jurisdictions were represented at the meeting on 4 December. The UK Government were represented by Lord McKenzie of Luton, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department of Communities and Local Government; the Irish Government were represented by Michael Finneran TD, Minister with responsibility for housing and local services; the Scottish Government were represented by Alex Neil MSP, Minister for Housing and Communities; the Welsh Assembly was represented by Kath Palmer, a senior housing official; the Jersey Government were represented by Deputy Sean Power, Assistant Minister for Housing; the Guernsey Government were represented by Deputy Dave Jones, Minister for Housing; and the Isle of Man Government were represented by John Shimmin MHK, Minister for Local Government and the Environment.

The meeting was the first to gather the Housing Ministers from all the member jurisdictions together to discuss the pressing issues that are impacting on housing across the jurisdictions. It also provided an unprecedented opportunity for the assembled Housing Ministers to exchange views and disseminate best practice in the housing sector. The meeting had a challenging and tightly packed agenda. It considered papers in relation to four specific areas of work and received short supporting presentations from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the European Investment Bank and the Housing Finance Corporation.

The first paper looked at sustainable and more energy-efficient housing, including the use of renewable technologies. Ministers agreed that that was an important issue that had the potential to boost the economy and to help reduce the impacts of climate change, and we agreed that work should be taken

forward to identify effective measures that could be introduced in new and existing homes.

Minister Finneran provided a comprehensive overview of the South of Ireland's experience in greening its housing stock through the introduction of mandatory standards for the use of renewable technologies through building control and summarised the outworkings of that initiative with regard to reduced energy consumption and carbon emissions.

Other examples of good practice, such as the Welsh Assembly's pilot scheme to deliver 22 housing units to level 4 and 5 of the 'Code for Sustainable Homes', were also discussed.

The Scottish Minister for Housing and Communities advised that Scotland has established a best practice unit to consider renewable technologies across the world and that the unit will be happy to share its work with us. The topic generated debate on the merits of retrofitting as opposed to newbuild and the success of financial incentives to drive change versus regulation. It became clear from the meeting that a lot of good work is going on in each of the jurisdictions, which, when sufficiently advanced, can be shared to the benefit of all members.

The second paper sought to identify new opportunities for increasing private investment to fund more social housing. It was accompanied by two short presentations from Tom Hackett of the European Investment Bank and Piers Williamson of the Housing Finance Corporation. Several innovative initiatives are under way in many of the jurisdictions to increase the use of private finance to provide social and affordable housing, and officials have been asked to produce a paper pulling together the full spectrum of products for further discussion.

The meeting heard that, since the inception of the Housing Finance Corporation in 1987, it has made over £2.5 billion available to social landlords across Britain and Northern Ireland. The meeting welcomed the news that the European Investment Bank is to invest a record £345 million in social housing across Britain and Northern Ireland in 2010, which will bring its total investment to £810 million. All those who were present agreed that that was a significant vote of confidence for our efforts to deliver social housing, and we agreed to work closely with the Housing Finance Corporation and the European Investment Bank to make the case for continuing support, particularly when the bank is facing pressure to invest elsewhere across Europe in other areas.

I am particularly delighted to announce that the £30 million secured from the European Investment Bank for Northern Ireland will assist the five successful housing associations in delivering 820 units of social housing across the length and breadth of the North.

That financial injection will complement the funding that I have already made available and will support the delivery of 1,750 new homes during this financial year, which will be the largest number of new homes for over a decade.

The third paper considered the changing demographics of the population across the jurisdictions and the impacts that that will have on future housing need. It was accompanied by a short presentation from Joe Frey, the head of research at the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. The meeting heard that there will be an extra 2.4 million older households in Britain by 2026, which will have an impact on the range and type of housing that is required to meet the growing need in the years ahead. It became evident that the demographic challenges that lie ahead exercise all jurisdictions and that the BIC housing work stream provides a useful forum to share statistics and to report on best practices that will inform how we provide for the tenants of the future. All jurisdictions agreed to work closely on that issue as new data and statistics emerge.

The final paper considered the need to provide more affordable housing products, and, although there is vast variation in house prices across the BIC jurisdictions, the meeting reflected how challenging it was for all member jurisdictions to deliver affordable housing during a period of reduced financial products in the financial sector. Lord McKenzie, representing the Department of Communities and Local Government, provided a useful overview of the numerous affordable housing products that are available in England, and other Housing Ministers took the opportunity to outline their approach to tackling the issue. It was agreed that the housing work stream should examine more innovative solutions with financial institutions and developers to produce more holistic developer-led affordable housing opportunities that the financial sector could support. That work will be further developed in the months ahead.

1.30 pm

The session concluded on a positive note, in that the meeting highlighted that a lot of good work is already under way across the jurisdictions. However, much remains to be done. All Ministers agreed that the issues at hand presented both challenges and opportunities for their respective jurisdictions, particularly in the current economic climate. I remain firmly of the view that the challenges ahead in housing will be better addressed in a joined-up manner, with all jurisdictions pooling their research and learning from one another's experiences. The BIC identified areas where further targeted work by officials can add value to the process under way in each of the member jurisdictions. That work will be taken forward in the coming months, and I have agreed to update my BIC housing colleagues on progress in the summer.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): I thank the Minister for her statement. Looking at the matter more from a constituency point of view, I note that she referred to the 820 units and 1,750 units that are in the pipeline. In my constituency, another three parcels of land have recently been sold off to the private sector. How can all that good news transfer to our communities and instil some confidence that the good work that the Minister referred to is actually good news for local communities?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development for his question. He, quite rightly, asked how the BIC housing work stream can be translated into constituencies, particularly Strangford. He will know that we will be building more houses this year than have been built in each year over the last decade. I am sure that in this year, and probably the next three years, Strangford will get its fair share of those houses.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. She spoke about all jurisdictions pooling their research and about what has been done about the knowledge of different schemes that have been initiated. Will the Minister tell us whether the effectiveness of schemes, such as warm homes schemes, in other jurisdictions has been addressed, and whether information from other jurisdictions that may improve the delivery and effectiveness of schemes here will be shared?

The Minister for Social Development: The Member is probably already aware that, at the moment, there is a scheme in Britain that is equivalent to the warm homes scheme. Ministers, through the housing work stream, and officials, through the various jurisdictions, exchange experiences of various schemes to reduce and minimise the impact of fuel poverty on an ongoing basis, whether with my counterpart in the South of Ireland or with other counterparts in Scotland, England, Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the Minister's announcement of £30 million for social housing, equating to 820 units this year. Will the Minister inform the House how much of the Programme for Government target for 2011 — £925 million of investment in social housing — her Department will achieve?

The Minister for Social Development: The £30 million, which came from the European Investment Bank, will help to deliver 26 schemes across Northern Ireland in this financial year and will also operate in the next financial year. Fold Housing Association will run three schemes, Helm Housing will run three schemes, North and West Voluntary Housing Group will run two schemes, Oaklee Housing Association

will run four schemes and Trinity Housing will run 14 schemes. That will go some considerable distance towards delivering the social housing development programme this year and next year. I will be making an announcement within the next couple of months about the social housing development programme for next year and the following two years.

The significant point is that we are building more houses this year than we have ever built in each year over the past decade. That means that we are working an economic miracle at a time of constrained financial resources.

Mr Burns: I congratulate the Minister for attracting a record level of investment in housing in Northern Ireland. Can she give us some insight into how that funding was secured?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mr Burns for his question. When I launched the new housing agenda in February 2008, I made a commitment to deliver more innovative and imaginative solutions than ever before so that the housing crisis would be addressed. That was especially the case in that many more social homes were built with existing resources. I met the chief executive of The Housing Finance Corporation last year, when we announced details of its first ever investment in social housing in the North, which was for Clanmil Housing in Belfast.

I have continued to work closely with The Housing Finance Corporation to make the case for further and increased investment in social housing in Northern Ireland so that a greater number of homes will be delivered for people who are in housing need. I am delighted that that work has paid off, culminating in European Investment Bank funding of £30 million, which I announced in December 2009 in Newcastle. That is a major vote of confidence, not only for the five successful housing associations but for people who are in housing need and on the waiting list and who will be allocated property. It is also a vote of confidence for the much wider work that I am doing to deliver the new housing agenda.

Mr Craig: I note with interest, Minister, that you referred to the private finance initiatives that will be considered, especially innovative schemes in other jurisdictions that have led to the delivery of social housing. Minister, can you assure the House that you and your Department will investigate innovative schemes for Northern Ireland to further deliver social housing in future years? As we all know, due to the new constraints that whatever party forms the Government in the near future will put on public expenditure, private finance will probably be key to that delivery.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will Members refer their questions through the Chair?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mr Craig for his question. We were asked to take the lead on that avenue of financial innovation because we were already doing that and because other institutions and Administrations were following us. At the British-Irish Council meeting in December 2009, I took the opportunity to make the case directly to the European Investment Bank and The Housing Finance Corporation for ongoing investment in social housing. Naturally, the rest is up to the housing associations to deliver.

The Member asked what further work we will be doing. We have been doing significant amounts of work in the area of financial innovation. We have introduced the concept of bond financing to housing associations. I am pleased to say that the Fold Housing Association and North and West Housing have recently secured their first ever bond from The Housing Finance Corporation. That would not have happened unless I had encouraged and exhorted housing associations and the housing movement to go down the road of financial innovation to release as many houses as possible so that we can cater for housing need.

The Department has already been building more houses on land that it owns, proving that we are making the best use of the money that we have available. In addition, we got a good financial deal in Mr Craig's constituency of Lagan Valley for 112 houses, which are ex-military housing, at Pond Park. Naturally, I want to do more of that, and I hope that the Committee for Social Development will be able to support me in all those initiatives and will make a strong case in supporting me and in urging others to support the need for financial innovation in housing.

Mr F McCann: I thank the Minister for her statement and commend her on acquiring £30 million from the European Investment Bank. Are the 820 units in addition to the 1,750 that were promised under the Programme for Government, or have they become part of the overall target of 1,750 units? The Minister spoke about sustainability. We all look for sustainable communities across our constituencies. Is mixed tenure still a key part of the housing strategy that the Minister is striving to implement?

The Minister for Social Development: The record £30 million investment in five housing associations this year will complement the funding that I already made available and will support the delivery of 1,750 new homes this year, which is our largest total for a decade. We are building more houses this year than for more than a decade because of my commitment to tackle housing need. Mr McCann rightly mentioned mixed tenure. I fully support mixed tenure, which was a cornerstone of the new housing agenda.

Mr F McCann: On a point of order, —

Mr Deputy Speaker: No points of order will be taken during questions.

Mrs M Bradley: The Minister said that a key issue was to deliver eco-friendly and environmentally sound housing. How will that be done in Northern Ireland? Again, I welcome the work that the Minister is doing.

The Minister for Social Development: When I launched the new housing agenda in February 2008, I made it clear that I did not want to build just homes, but to build better homes. I firmly believe that more sustainable homes lead to more sustainable communities. That is why the houses that we are now building are 25% more energy efficient than ever. However, if we are to alleviate fuel poverty, which blights so many families in Northern Ireland, we need to be more creative in building energy efficient houses that are also cost-effective. That is why I plan to announce in the coming months details of the largest housing development in Britain and Ireland of the most energy efficient and environmentally friendly housing possible, and it will be delivered first in Northern Ireland. So, Members can watch this space.

Mr Easton: I also welcome the extra £30 million that is being invested in Northern Ireland by the European Investment Bank. Did the British-Irish Council hold discussions about getting extra money for maintenance schemes? The Minister is well aware that there is a huge shortage of money for such schemes, especially in my constituency. With that extra money coming in, will the Minister now be able to release any extra money for maintenance schemes, especially in the pensioners' bungalows in the Bloomfield estate, Bangor?

The Minister for Social Development: Much as it may surprise Members, the position of maintenance contracts was not a topic for discussion at the housing work stream, nor was the issue of Egan contracts, but I will provide an update. Egan contractors started this year with a £16 million budget. The Executive decided that the Department for Social Development, as a condition of extra money for grants, should allocate a further £20 million for Egan contractors. A further £8 million was allocated, followed by the recent announcement of £6 million more. That brings to £30 million the total this year for Egan, which undertakes planned maintenance schemes on the revenue side. I am confident that we will have more good news on that issue before the month is out.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton): I congratulate the Minister on securing the first meeting of the BIC's housing work stream and for having it in Northern Ireland.

I ask that Minister clear up some of the confusion stemming from the very welcome announcement that

Northern Ireland has secured £30 million from the European Investment Bank. Can she assure the House that that money will not serve as a substitute for existing public finance but will supply the finance that the housing associations would have had to find from other sources? Perhaps she can clarify that.

1.45 pm

Looking ahead to the delivery of further investment for new social housing, I ask the Minister to tell the House whether the finance for the social housing development programme for 2010-11 is secure, or will there have to be, as there were for 2009-2010, serious cutbacks on maintenance and refurbishment programmes?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Chairman of the Committee for Social Development for his question and for his kind remarks about the British-Irish Council meeting on the housing work stream, the first ever to be held in these islands. For Members' information, further work will be done in the North/South Ministerial Council. I have not sat still on the issue.

The Member rightly asks whether the money is additional or whether it will supplant other funds. It is clearly additional money, which will assist housing associations — five housing associations especially — in delivering the social housing development programme.

This year, we will deliver 1,750 new homes at a cost of £155 million, which equates to a grant rate of approximately £88,000 a unit. However, the costs of schemes vary widely. For example, supported housing schemes are fully funded, such are the costs involved, whereas schemes on land that the Housing Executive owns can cost half as much as those in which land-acquisition costs are involved. That is the difference between those and transfer schemes.

Delivering three-bedroom homes in Fermanagh is cheaper than delivering them in Belfast, as land costs vary considerably. Therefore, I am unable to give the Chairperson a figure for every home that we build in every year. However, I can assure Members that the calculations that we use to determine value for money are flexible enough to recognise all the different elements that contribute to the final cost of delivering homes.

The 820 homes that the European funding will support will be delivered over 18 months, with some starting this financial year and others in the next, as I said in response to Mr Armstrong's question.

Mr Hamilton asked about the housing budget for next year. As Members are aware, no decisions have yet been made on next year's Budget. The Executive have still to agree the various departmental spending

plans. However, there is no doubt that the housing budget will continue to come under pressure, given the loss of £200 million in capital receipts between this year and last. Just as I have done this year, I will do all that I can to protect the vulnerable and those in greatest need. We must build more homes if we are to have any hope of helping those in housing stress. It goes without saying that I welcome any help or support that the Committee for Social Development can give to ensure that the budget that is allocated to me for next year reflects the challenges that I will be expected to meet.

I remind the Chairperson, members of the Committee and all Members of the House that, despite the huge financial shortfall that we face, we will this year achieve the highest number of social housing starts for any year for over a decade. The Chairperson, as will all Members, will agree that that is a significant achievement, notwithstanding the financial challenges that we face.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her statement. It is very beneficial for the relevant institutions to share learning regularly.

The Minister mentioned affordable housing. In England, the practice of raising developers' contributions has been ongoing for some time. Has the Minister gleaned any examples of best practice or initiatives from there?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Ms Lo for her question. Naturally, the other institutions and Administrations have various innovative solutions to developer contributions. I had discussions with the Dublin Administration some two and a half years ago and saw, as I did in London, in Hammersmith and Tower Hamlets, clear examples of where developer contributions were used and good examples of mixed-tenure and mixed-income housing. For want of better information, there will be further ongoing discussions with Lord McKenzie. In fact, my officials will shortly be going to London to be briefed on all those areas, as a consequence of the discussions that were held in Newcastle. I look forward to updating the House on all those issues later this year. I am in ongoing discussions with the Minister of the Environment about local developer contributions. That issue was also part of the new housing agenda.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

First Stage

The Minister for Regional Development: I beg to introduce the Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA 6/09], which is a Bill to provide for permit schemes to control the carrying out of works in roads; for prohibiting or restricting the use of roads in connection with special events; for inquiries in connection with the exercise of certain functions relating to roads; and for connected purposes.

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.

Pensions Regulator Tribunal (Transfer of Functions) Bill

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that under Standing Order 37(2), the Further Consideration Stage of a Bill is restricted to debating any further amendments that are tabled to the Bill. As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Pensions Regulator Tribunal (Transfer of Functions) Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at the Bill's Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Compulsory Voting

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 Kinahan: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the positive effect that compulsory voting has had on democracy in the Commonwealth of Australia; and calls on Her Majesty's Government to consider introducing similar rules for elections in the United Kingdom.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you are letting me indulge in a matter that has been a passion of mine since I entered politics, and I hope that we will encourage much debate. Today, we have a rare chance to stand outside the bubble of normal Stormont business and to examine and debate the possibility of adopting the Australian style of compulsory voting. This is a chance for all of us to drop party policy lines and have an open debate. It is also a chance to explore how we can make politics and political institutions work better for the public and for politicians, and I am extremely grateful to be able to raise the issue. We should be having such debates on how we can make a positive difference to society much more often. We cannot implement such an improvement, but we can lead the way and send the right signal to Westminster.

We are at a turning point in the Government of Northern Ireland and a turning point, albeit a painfully slow one, in the Assembly. We are still exploring how to make devolved government work with the rather stuttering DUP/Sinn Féin coalition. Now is a great time to explore introducing compulsory voting.

Usually, there are respectable turnouts for the Westminster and Assembly elections. However, last summer, the turnout plummeted to new depths during the European election, and, last week, during the Lurgan by-election. That was not helped by the Westminster expenses scandal and other similar events. Voting has gone down from 62% and 63% to just under 43% and, last week, to 26%. However, we must remember that turnout in the European elections is traditionally low and that turnout in a January election for a single council seat would also be low.

Sadly, we have had our own crisis recently, which will have seen the opinion of us, as politicians, plummet to new depths. We know that the youth of today, and an ever-increasing number of the population, have lost interest in politics, if, indeed, they ever had that interest. People have lost faith and see not voting as acceptable.

As we conduct our surgeries in our constituency offices, we have all seen that it is often the marginalised members of our community, those who we are so often helping, who form a large section of the non-voters. We are excluding such people by not having compulsory voting.

The present system allows too many people — between one third and one half of the voting population; in other words, around 500,000 people — to not bother to vote. That phrase, “not bother” should shock Members. It is similar to many of the excuses given: “I do not know anything about politics”; “I am not political”; “I think politics in Northern Ireland is a waste of time”; and, of course, there are some people who feel that they are above politics.

It is a total and utter disgrace that we have allowed such a situation to arise. Consider the suffragettes, just over a century ago, having their jaws wired open to be force-fed as they fought for the right for women to vote; or the dead of two world wars fighting for the freedom of government and the freedom to vote. If one thinks of all the other conflicts, even our own, it really all comes down to the right to vote. People should be voting. Voting is a chance for people to choose their government, to vote out those in government, and to ensure that their idea of society, fairness and rights is represented in the Chamber or in other Chambers. Not voting throws all that to the wind.

In Australia, people have to take part by going to a polling booth or by postal vote. People can deliberately spoil their ballot or make a mess of it, but they have to take part. Anyone who does not take part is fined \$AU20, which is equivalent to £11. The fine can rise if someone is brought to court, and, indeed, people can end up in prison.

In its first election with a system of compulsory voting, Australian voting statistics moved from 59% to 91%. Australia now has consistently higher figures, and that is something that should make all of us jealous. In Australia, voting is on a Saturday and not a working day, and that day is made a national holiday. In Australia, it is easier to use postal votes: people can vote while on holiday and they can vote without going to a polling booth much easier than people here can. We need to review our voting system. How many people do we disenfranchise during each election because the electorate is given only a week or two to sort out the postal votes?

I congratulate the Electoral Commission on its recent efforts to raise registration. However, if everybody aged 18 and above was automatically and compulsorily registered we would not have such a problem. If politicians knew that they did not have to

be so concerned with trying to get voters to the polls, they could concentrate on their message.

Two years ago, I attended some vox pop question and answer sessions in north Down, and, in almost every grouping of voters — 10 DUP, 10 UUP and 10 others — there was only ever one person who had a slight interest in politics. That is quite shocking. If every voter had to vote, he or she would have to take some interest; even, sadly, if it were just to remember a name.

In Australia, every school teaches every student about the political system and its parties.

What hope do we have when our Education Minister cannot run the schools?

2.00 pm

In Australia, voting is not seen as onerous, a loss of freedom, or not being the Australian way. Remember, the decision to make voting compulsory was made in 1925, at a time when Australia was under much more British influence than it is now. Australia is proud of its compulsory voting system, and we want to be proud of our voting system.

However, it is not just the voting system that needs to change; we must also change. We need to make this institution more effective, inclusive and dynamic, and we need to build a joint vision for all groups in our society. Each one of us needs to be squeaky clean, honest and show the highest standards of life, although the public and the press need to allow for us all being human. We must, as the school report might say, do better.

We also need to remove the blocks that exist in society to allow the public to take more of an interest in politics. In the past five years, I have had civil servants, police, soldiers and people in numerous private companies all say that they cannot get involved in politics. That is, of course, an excuse. Considering the number of people who work in the government sector and the private sector, we have to change the attitudes of an enormous number of people. There are too many blocks in our society: people are encouraged to be apolitical, and too many are now apathetic.

Everyone should be encouraged to discuss politics openly and should not be ashamed of having a good argument or a good discussion. No one should, within reason, be ashamed of his or her views. One council does not allow political groups to rent or use its rooms. That sort of attitude is endemic in Northern Ireland, and we need to change it. Business needs to get more involved and support, lobby and work with politicians. Business and commerce should not be put off by the present investigations.

Recently, we have seen a constant assault on the integrity of politicians by 'The Daily Telegraph', on 'The Stephen Nolan Show' and in many other forms of

media. Much of that criticism has been justified. However, I wonder how many of those who call in and grumble actually vote. It is a journalist's duty not just to criticise and to investigate but also to be good and to praise. Some do that, but many do not.

I have offered a glimpse of the Australian compulsory voting system, which we could easily adopt or tweak. If we did not use the stick, we could use the carrot by, for example, offering money off rates. Voting could take place over two days, or we could start to use electronic voting. We could, and I will use the term again, do better.

If all that I have mentioned was implemented and, most importantly, compulsory voting was put in place, it would start the change that we need to galvanise our country into being the envy of the world. That is an easy, painless and unifying step that could really quicken our move from a sectarian society to one that is at ease with itself.

Mr Ross: Since the beginning of the debate, turnout in the Chamber has improved, for which we should be grateful.

The Member for South Antrim Mr Kinahan has tabled an interesting motion. It is not one that I can agree with, but it highlights a number of issues that are important to us. In Northern Ireland, it is generally said that there is a higher turnout for elections than there is in GB. However, there was only 42.81% turnout for the European Election last year. In my constituency of East Antrim, turnout was 34.5%. In a number of recent elections, East Antrim has had one of the lowest turnouts in Northern Ireland. That is very frustrating for politicians in the area, but it is something that politicians from every political party and every part of the United Kingdom would agree is frustrating, because so many people appear to be turned off from the democratic process and be disengaged and uninterested in politics.

Mr Kinahan said that it would be great if politicians did not have to worry about people coming out to vote at election time. I disagree with that, because everyone in the House — every political party and every Member — has a responsibility to try to make sure that he or she engages with people to try to ensure that the platform on which they stand entices people to come out and vote for them. All individual Members and political parties have that responsibility. It is a challenge.

In the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Speaker initiated a number of roadshows, the idea behind which was to engage the public and to create a greater interest in politics in a number of areas. Some roadshows were successful. I participated in one in Carrickfergus, but it was unsuccessful because only a small number of people attended. People were not

interested; I hope that was not because I was there. That is the crux of the issue: people are not interested in politics. Compulsory voting will not fix that problem but will mask it and hide it away. However, people's lack of interest in politics will remain, because it is their right to be uninterested in politics. We may not like that situation, but people have the freedom to choose.

Mr Kinahan mentioned freedom in his opening remarks. Each individual in the United Kingdom should have the freedom to choose whether to vote. They should have the freedom to choose whether to be interested in politics and to decide whether to leave their house to cast a ballot on election day. As Mr Kinahan said, there have been struggles throughout history, and people have died for their right to vote. It is disappointing that people do not use their right to vote. However, people are not under a duty or obligation to vote. That is the crux of the argument. In a real democracy, citizens are able to choose whether to exercise that right. As long as nothing stops them voting for whomever they want, we should not tell them how to vote or insist that they vote.

Compulsory voting is not the norm in Australia only. The Member will know that other countries such as Brazil, Singapore and Peru use compulsory voting. The legislation states that an individual who does not vote could be fined. I have examined some research on that issue, and it is fairly clear that although legislation in many of those countries allows states to fine an individual for not voting, they do not do so in many cases because it is massively expensive to enforce such legislation. The bureaucracy that is involved in enforcement is huge, and most states use that system to try to scare people into voting.

Another issue that we must consider is whether the state should use the big-stick approach to make people vote. It is expensive, oppressive and difficult to enforce, and there is a chance that millions of people would choose not to co-operate anyway. Although I disagree, many religious groups believe that they should not participate in political democracy. That is another issue that Mr Kinahan did not highlight. Is ill-informed participation better than no participation? Is somebody who has no interest in politics, does not know who is standing, does not know the political parties and does not follow current affairs in a position to vote?

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

Mr Ross: I will.

In conclusion, it is important to note that higher turnout does not necessarily increase the legitimacy of government. I am aware of the possibility of the use of "none of the above" boxes. However, the Member

should perhaps have considered ways to increase turnout —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time.

Mr Ross: We should examine other electoral systems before we use the draconian method of compulsory voting.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Although I welcome the motion as part of a debate on democratic participation, I feel that it is, in many ways, premature. The motion states:

"That this Assembly notes the positive effect that compulsory voting has had on democracy in ... Australia".

I am not aware that any Committee, individual or party in the House has created a position paper that outlines the pros and cons of the Australian model or of any other model that is in favour of compulsory voting. Nevertheless, I have examined the Australian model, and there are some positive effects, notably the proactive outreach steps that have been taken whereby mobile polling stations go to certain quarters and residential homes to make it easier for people to participate. However, there is a negative side. There are penalties for people who decide not to vote, and compelling people to vote would have an adverse effect on those who feel that they have the right to abstain.

One could argue that the electoral register, which is compiled by the Electoral Office here, is accurate, but it is certainly not complete. There are still too many bureaucratic obstructions to getting on the register. Those issues must be dealt with more thoroughly and on an ongoing basis in order to encourage participation in elections.

Although the motion has merits, there are too many unanswered questions, and the debate has not been thorough enough. Today's debate is not the beginning, the middle and the end; it should be seen as the start of an engagement. The motion calls for a vote to be taken that would conclude one way or another, and, therefore, my party has decided to abstain. However, we encourage further participation in the debate to see whether we can advance the issue as it is expressed in the motion.

Mr Dallat: I do not support the motion, but I respect the Member who proposed it. I believe that the Members of the Assembly must first relate to the people who elected us. I am asked frequently what it was that attracted me to politics, and — this is not a plug for the SDLP — it was about the ability to relate to ordinary people and to serve them. It certainly was not about donning Armani suits and Barker shoes, or appointing spin doctors, all the things that trendy modern politics seems to concentrate on. It most certainly was not about self-preservation. The public are knowledgeable

enough to know that there has been far too much of the self-preservation syndrome in the Assembly.

Although we should not look back too often, the last really big turnout was in 1998 for the referendum on the Good Friday Agreement and the first election to the Assembly. The people of Northern Ireland were united in the belief that the Assembly was going to address the issues that were important to them. Members will know that savage cuts are coming, for example, in the Health Service, over the next few weeks. People question what has been done collectively to determine those cuts.

There have also been serious job losses. Day and daily, right across the North, the self-esteem and dignity of breadwinners is taken away from them. In my constituency last Friday, 20 more jobs were lost. Someone said, "But it is only 20." It is 20 families who do not know what the future holds, but who placed their trust in the Assembly to produce a Budget that would focus on the need to create jobs.

There is no point in saying simply that the cuts send shivers down the spine. Of course they do, but what is being done about it? What was the subject of the heavy discussions that have taken place in the past two or three weeks? Was it anything to do with education, health or job losses? Not at all.

I hope that there will be a change of mood now that the last snowflake has disappeared, that there will be a thaw, and that the Assembly will become an inclusive place where, collectively, we all will be included in whatever happens. If we begin to accept that ordinary people need to have confidence in what happens here, that will be a good way to encourage them to come out and vote.

2.15 pm

Mr Weir: I take on board what the Member has said, and I appreciate the proposer of the motion's argument that we should encourage people to be more involved in politics and have a greater sense of civic responsibility. However, not voting is one way that people can express disillusionment with politics and the political system. That may be merited or, on some occasions, it may not, but it is one way that a message can be sent to politicians collectively that they need to refocus. If there were compulsory voting, which would more or less guarantee a 95% turnout, that could mask the legitimate right of people to wish a plague on all politicians' houses because they are not happy with what has happened.

Mr Dallat: I thought that my only semblance of democracy was about to be robbed before I remembered that I have an extra minute in which to speak.

I accept that bad politicians are elected by good people who do not vote. That worries me. We need to

get that message across. The Electoral Commission has a responsibility to get across to people the need to participate in democracy. Our schools are increasingly involved — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish that Lord Morrow would give me my say. I know that he and his party exclude me from everything else, but for the precious couple of minutes that I am speaking, I ask him in the friendliest of terms to please let me get on with my speech.

Youth clubs across Northern Ireland are involved in democracy weeks. As Members will know from personal experience, it is a challenge for politicians to relate to young people. Many of those who do not vote are young people, and that worries me. There is always the challenge to persuade people that democracy works. There is a need to ensure that young people are not attracted to terror groups or to people who think that there is a different way to achieve the peace and prosperity that the public voted for in 1998. I thank the Member for proposing the motion.

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

Mr Dallat: Of course, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I still have five seconds left.

It is an opportunity to put a focus on democracy in a voluntary way. *[Interruption.]*

I am glad that so many Members wanted to intervene. That tells me that democracy might begin to work here.

Dr Farry: Speaking to a packed Chamber, I was going to make a comment about the importance of compulsory attendance of MLAs in debates.

I understand that the Danish Parliament requires compulsory voting from their equivalent of MPs, although I am not sure that that would be a good system for us, given the problems that some Members have with voting in the Chamber, including Mr Kinahan's predecessor from South Antrim.

The proposed motion is the wrong way through which to explore a very important subject. We can all agree that lower and falling electoral turnout is a serious problem. Representative democracy depends on popular participation, which is falling. As a consequence, the authority of our institutions suffers. However, the difference between the approach proposed in the motion and what is coming across in the debate is that the motion identifies the problem and blames the electorate for it. The motion is akin to saying to the electorate, "You are not taking part in democracy; therefore, look what you are getting". It proposes that we regulate their behaviour by compelling them to turn out and vote.

In contrast, the responsibility has to fall back on us as elected representatives, and on political parties. It is our duty to motivate people to come out and vote. That is the essence of a healthy democracy. It is no good having a notionally high turnout if that turnout is neither well intended nor voluntary, or if people vote as a result of some form of duress, such as a fine or even imprisonment. That would mean that people are not freely expressing their opinion, which is what lies at the heart of democracy.

There are flaws in the concept of compulsory voting. Alastair Ross referred to people who have religious objections to voting. We must respect freedom of religion in society. Some people may regard all the options presented on the ballot paper as equally objectionable and, therefore, not wish to participate.

Mr Ross: I agree with the Member totally. Some people would argue that a “none of the above” box would settle that problem. However, does he agree that, far from doing that, such an option highlights the nonsensical position of compulsory voting? Voting for “none of the above” defeats the purpose, and there would be problems if “none of the above” received more votes than any of the actual parties.

Dr Farry: There is a famous 1980s comedy film in which “none of the above” won the election. My colleague Mr Weir is a 1980s film buff and will probably remember its name.

Mr Weir: ‘Brewster’s Millions’.

Dr Farry: ‘Brewster’s Millions’ — very good.

Why go to the trouble of compelling people to go along to a polling station if they are simply going to spoil their vote? Why not just let them stay at home if that is their decision? We must respect the fact that we live in a free and liberal society and that people have the freedom to choose what, and what not, to do.

In British democracy especially, there is a long-standing tradition that every man and every woman is a castle and that it is possible for adults to live their lives in isolation from the state as long as they are doing no harm to others. Over the years, that principle has been compromised through measures such as the requirements to pay taxes and send children to school and, in more recent times, the introduction of conscription. It has been judged that it is in the interests of society to compromise freedoms in those areas, but the introduction of compulsory voting would take that to a different level.

Members have cited a host of examples of compulsory voting systems — the information was provided by Research Services — but those are largely historical legacies. There are very few examples of systems of compulsory voting that have been introduced in the past 30, 40 or 50 years. Most compulsory voting

systems are anachronisms that have not been taken off countries’ statute books and are simply not enforced. I imagine that it would be a breach of the European Convention on Human Rights to introduce a system of compulsory voting.

Instead, we need to focus on two issues. First, we must explain to people how participation and voting for candidates can make a difference to outcomes and affect the lives of individuals, their families and friends and society as a whole. We must explain the relevance of our Assembly, our Parliament and, even, the European Parliament. We discuss many issues that affect people deeply, and it is important that those people can make a difference by choosing their representatives.

The second issue is the integrity of the political process, which has faced a major challenge, particularly in recent months. We must consider how to clean up politics in this country and elsewhere and give people confidence that politicians are in it for the good of society rather than for themselves. People can make a difference through the choices that they make. Although I recognise that the motion is well intended, it misses the fundamental point that we must reflect on ourselves and what we do.

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

Dr Farry: Rather than placing the emphasis on voters and blaming them for their lack of motivation, let us motivate them.

Mr Shannon: I do not support the motion, although I believe that the Member has put it forward for the best reasons. The concept of compulsory voting is not new. Geoff Hoon brought the idea to the fore after a low turnout of just 61% in the 2005 general election. Typically, people in Northern Ireland have always been more motivated to vote. That is because of our unique history and what is at stake for people here when they vote. The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) ‘Election Guide’ states that 62·8% of registered voters turned out in the 2007 Assembly election.

Thaire isnae onie doot at thon isnae the figure we wud laike tae see an’ when we tak’ a leuk aa Belgium, wha hed a 91·08% turnout wi’ onie a 5·75% spoiled vote, we micht ax fer wie we shudnae hae a compulsory votin’ system laike they hae. Votin’ hes bein compulsory i Belgium sine 1892. Ye hae tae gae intae a pollin’ booth bit ye dinnae hae tae maik a ballot.

There is no doubt that, when compared with Belgium, where there was a 91·08% turnout and only 5·75% of votes were spoiled, our turnout is not at the level at which we would like it to be. We may question why we should not implement a similar compulsory voting system. Compulsory voting has existed in Belgium since 1892. It is mandatory to enter a polling booth,

but to mark the ballot paper is not. After the election, a list of non-attendees is sent to the Office of the Public Prosecutor. Perhaps the mover of the motion will detail in his winding-up speech how penalties would apply to people who do not vote.

In Belgium, prosecutions are carried out in the absence of a decent excuse or explanation. A medically certified illness, being abroad or an act of God — there is no answer to that — are usually good enough reasons to escape punishment. The punishments are on an upward scale that starts with a small fine and rises for repeat offenders. People can be barred from the electoral list for 10 years. Perhaps those who do not want to vote simply do not vote so that they will be removed from the list. That also makes them ineligible for nomination, distinction or promotion by a public authority.

In Australia, 95·17% of people vote and only 2·55% of votes are spoiled. Australia has had a compulsory voting system since 1924, and, as in Belgium, a good excuse circumnavigates any punishment. The set fine is 20 Australian dollars, which equates to £10. Of the non-voters, 5% pay the fine straight away, and almost all the others provide a valid reason for not voting. A non-voter who decides to take his or her case to court only to lose will be fined 50 Australian dollars and could end up doing community service or spending a couple of days in jail as a result.

Mr Weir: The Member mentioned several of the compulsory voting's potential drawbacks. I appreciate that there may be a few other political anoraks in the Chamber. The Member mentioned Belgium and Australia, which use either an alternative vote system or a list system. I cannot think of many countries that apply compulsory voting to the system of a single transferable vote. It may be that compulsory voting adapts particularly poorly to that system. To make the point that they simply do not care about voting, a proportion of people who feel compelled to enter a polling booth may simply work their way down the ballot paper writing one to 10 in the order in which the names appear. Compulsory voting may, therefore, be particularly skewed against the system of a single transferable vote. Those of us whose surname begins with the letter W may have a particular reason to fear it. It is interesting that I can think of no other country in which compulsory voting applies that uses the single transferable vote system.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention. I do not wish to be offensive, but some people refer to the example that he cited as “donkey voting”, whereby people start at the top of the list of candidates and work their way down to the bottom. If that were to happen in a compulsory voting system, the difference in the effect on those named Adams as opposed to Weir would be clear.

A nation that employs a better, if not ideal, system is the United States of America. It ran a ‘No Vote, No Voice’ campaign, and the only compulsion to vote was a moral one. The percentage of voter turnout there is high and, over the past three elections, has risen steadily as the message has been made increasingly clear. That kind of method should be re-examined, and perhaps the mover of the motion will do so in his winding-up speech.

On a website dedicated to compulsory voting, I read a point that I believe to be true:

“A higher voter turnout cannot be said to heighten the legitimacy of a government when the voters have been forced into giving their support.”

That is the key issue, as Mr Dallat and other Members mentioned. It is better to encourage people to vote than compel them to turn up. The Latin term “*ceteris paribus*” means “to stay at home”, and that right should be reflected. If we are not careful, we will be heading towards a nanny state.

Dr Farry: Was that Ulster Scots?

Mr Shannon: The Member will be glad to hear that it was not Ulster Scots, although I said it with an Ulster-Scots accent. We do not want legislation that mirrors the term “gym attendance compulsory” that is used in schools. That means that pupils must attend PE lessons. The introduction of compulsory voting would be similar, and I am sure that the mover of the motion does not want that. As Members, we want to change lives and make people feel that they are part of that process.

In 2003, the UK Electoral Commission took a quick look at the issue of compulsory voting and concluded:

“compulsory voting would not in itself address the underlying causes of low turnout, and in particular the apparent lack of engagement between potential voters and politics.”

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

Mr Shannon: School curriculums should press upon children the reasons to vote, but I do not support the nanny state or this proposal.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease for a few moments. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member called to speak will be Simon Hamilton.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Executive Office, Brussels

1. **Mr Neeson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their plans for the future use of the Executive office in Brussels.

(AQO 574/10)

The Acting First Minister (Mrs Foster): The Executive office in Brussels has recently moved to new premises. The new office is located close to all of the European institutions. Invest Northern Ireland continues to be co-located with the Executive office, and the premises incorporates an office for visitors, meeting rooms, a conference facility, hot desks for visiting Ministers and officials, and videoconferencing facilities.

The office in Brussels has provided an important link between Northern Ireland Ministers and their Departments and the institutions in Brussels. In my role as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I have personally used the services of the office on two recent occasions. Northern Ireland Departments, local government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other local organisations all continue to make use of the facilities and staff resources that are available.

It is our wish that the office should continue to serve as a broad range of uses as possible. The new premises provide the opportunity not only to serve the traditional visiting groups but has space to showcase our culture, education and other sectors, and to help develop business links with our European partners. Over the coming weeks, staff in the office will be preparing a programme of events to make maximum use of the new facility.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am aware that the report from the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) on European affairs will be debated in the Assembly in the near future. In fact, the Assembly and Business Trust is sending a delegation to Brussels at the start of next month. Does the Minister agree that rather than simply being an office of the Executive in

Brussels, it should be an office of the Northern Ireland Assembly in Brussels?

The Acting First Minister: I thank the Member for his question. Indeed, it should not only be an office for the Northern Ireland Assembly; it should be an office for the entirety of the Northern Ireland institutions. I know that, for example, Belfast City Council hopes to hold an event in the office at the end of this month, which it is doing in conjunction with some of the MEPs. I very much welcome that. We need to be making ourselves more amenable in Europe. We very much need to have, and do have, a presence there. Now there is an opportunity for all of us to go out.

I think that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development visited the European office recently. That is very important because we all know about the influence that Europe has on our lives here in Northern Ireland. Therefore, I very much agree with the Member: we should be making maximum use of that office in Brussels.

Mr Shannon: I know that the Minister is aware that the OFMDFM Committee is currently holding a European inquiry. There is a very clear need to have greater engagement between the Assembly and other regions in the United Kingdom. As the Minister also stated, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development went over some weeks ago, and members were suitably impressed with what they saw. That is very important.

Mr Speaker: The Member should come to his question.

Mr Shannon: Will the Minister tell us how she sees the engagement with Europe for the Northern Ireland region in the United Kingdom directly with Brussels?

The Acting First Minister: Since devolution, we have seen very much an increased presence from Northern Ireland out in Europe. I recall one of the MEPs, before devolution, saying very clearly that we were not spending enough of our time in Europe. However, regardless of what personal and party views may be about the European Union, and there are quite a few in this House, as, indeed, there are in many other houses, we, in the Executive, have made a firm commitment to work in Europe to maximise the benefit for the people here in Northern Ireland. That is very important. It is a way of developing alliances. Certainly, I have witnessed the way in which Scotland, for example, uses its office in Europe.

We can learn from the experience of that devolved Administration in making their presence felt in Europe; it is an approach that we should follow very closely.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the First Minister for her answer. However, given that the

Barroso task force has identified the unique contribution that the North could make by sharing our experience of conflict resolution, and given that the Executive are already committed to the development of a centre for conflict resolution and peace building, will the Minister clarify whether such a centre would receive funding from Europe?

The Acting First Minister: The Member knows that, in an initial task force report in early 2008, the then First Minister, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, and the deputy First Minister said that they envisaged that an international centre could be created here to support peace building in the European Union and beyond. Such a centre would enable people to come together and to benefit from sharing our experiences. That remains the situation.

There are very clear linkages with the work of the peace building and conflict resolution centre project under international exchange, and the work of the EU Peace programme, which is mentioned in the fifth theme of the EU task force action plan for 2009-10. We are talking about the sharing of experiences, and that is still very much on the cards. Although there is not yet clarity on issues including the location of the conflict centre, it remains on the agenda.

Mr Burns: Does the Minister agree that Europe is more important than ever after the approval of the Lisbon Treaty? As a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I have visited our European office in Brussels. Does the Minister agree that we should increase the number of staff in that office to a level that enables it to compete with other regions' offices?

The Acting First Minister: Europe has always been very important. In my former role as Minister of the Environment, I realised just how important the EU was because of the number of regulations and directives it issued that affected Northern Ireland.

I have listened carefully to Members' past complaints about the size of OFMDFM and the need to reduce staffing numbers. That also applies to the Brussels office, because those staff are employees of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Members must square their calls for more resources and more staff in Europe with asking for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to reduce its staff. They need to take that on board.

At present, there are four Northern Ireland civil servants in the Brussels office. Any time that I have visited that office, I have found them to be professional and very much engaged with civil servants in the rest of Europe. Therefore, they do a very good job. If more money were made available to OFMDFM, it could certainly consider resourcing more staff. If and until that happens, OFMDFM is content with staffing there.

Policing and Justice Powers

2. **Mr A Maginness** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what meetings they have held with party political leaders to discuss the devolution of policing and justice. (AQO 575/10)

The Acting First Minister: Over the past few months, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have held a series of meetings with key stakeholders on the devolution of policing and justice, including the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. As part of that process, the Ministers met the leadership of the main political parties on a number of occasions. As recently as last week, I met, separately, delegations from the Ulster Unionist Party, led by Sir Reg Empey; the Alliance Party, led by David Ford; and a team from the SDLP, which included Alban Maginness and Alex Attwood. I am aware that the deputy First Minister also met the leaders of the UUP, the SDLP and the Alliance Party. Those discussions are ongoing, and the deputy First Minister and I intend that further meetings will take place in the coming days.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Acting First Minister for her reply. She could at least have congratulated me on the prescience of my question. Any progress towards the devolution of policing and justice is to be welcomed. I put on record, once again, our party's full commitment to support that. However, it is important to include parties other than Sinn Féin and the DUP in that process. I emphasise that point to the Acting First Minister, and I ask her to give the House an assurance that all other parties will be involved in the process.

The Acting First Minister: I could give a very short answer to that question. I give the Member the assurance that other Members will be involved. Indeed, I said in answer to the first question that he asked that we plan to have meetings again in the coming days on this issue. Why would I say that if it were not the case? Therefore, we will meet the parties in the coming days to take forward these issues.

Mr Weir: Could I be the first today to congratulate the Acting First Minister on her position, albeit temporary? Does she believe that the devolution of policing and justice is a unionist objective?

The Acting First Minister: When this state was founded, the control of security was a key issue for the founding fathers, and, as most Members in the House will know, the former Northern Ireland Parliament fell in 1972 when policing and justice powers were removed to London in the face of what was, at that time, very much unionist opposition.

We, as a political party, have the return of policing and justice powers as a key manifesto commitment, when community confidence is in place. That remains the position, and I have to say that everybody who was

in the party at that time signed up to that key manifesto commitment.

That is the case right across the United Kingdom. The Scottish Government have full control of policing and justice, without any implications for the union, and the Welsh Assembly is moving towards primary legislative powers. People need to be cognisant of those issues. So, when the outstanding issues are dealt with, policing and justice will be good for all the people of Northern Ireland and should not be viewed in a sectoral way.

Mr Kinahan: Given that the two largest parties cannot make up two thirds plus one, which is needed for constitutional change, will the Acting First Minister ensure that all the main political parties are not just included in the process but are properly included in it, and that you listen to, consider and take on board their views and allow them to come back?

The Acting First Minister: I have already said in response to Alban Maginness that I very much believe that all the parties want to be involved. I welcome the fact that all the parties are showing good political maturity this afternoon in saying that they very much want to be involved in this project. There are some that would rather stand outside and score political points in relation to what is a very serious issue for moving forward. Therefore, I welcome the fact that all parties in the House want to be involved in the process, and we will continue to meet those parties in the coming days.

Mr Ford: I thank the Acting First Minister for her answers earlier about the willingness to meet other parties. Can she give an assurance that she and the deputy First Minister will ensure that those discussions are meaningful and will aim to achieve the widest possible agreement on the policies that might be implemented by a justice Department?

In that vein, will she also agree that action to deal with the logjam of other issues that are currently holding up Executive business alongside the justice issues will be one of the best ways to demonstrate confidence in the operation of the Assembly and the Executive?

The Acting First Minister: I hope that the other parties will be able to add to that community confidence in relation to the devolution of policing and justice, and, again, I welcome the fact that they very much want to help in building that confidence. As for the other issues that the Member mentioned, we certainly stand ready to have a discussion. Indeed, I have already had discussions with him about business in the Assembly and the Executive, and those discussions will continue with all the parties.

Ms Purvis: Will the Acting First Minister outline to all the parties in the Chamber how they could support

her and her colleagues in advancing the devolution of policing and justice?

2.45 pm

The Acting First Minister: I can certainly tell Members how they will deter that confidence growing, and we have seen some good examples of that over the past number of weeks. Nevertheless, I think it is about working in a collegiate way to get the best outcome for all the people of Northern Ireland. That is what our party is about, and I hope that it is also what every Member in this House is about.

Programme for Government Unit

3. **Mr McFarland** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the current work programme of the Programme for Government unit within their Department. (AQO 576/10)

The Acting First Minister: The Department's Programme for Government unit has a complement of three posts, and its primary purpose is to monitor and report on progress on implementing the Programme for Government. Working with colleagues from the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) and the Department of Finance and Personnel, the unit draws together delivery reports, which are presented to the Executive.

The first formal delivery report was published and brought to the attention of the Assembly in June 2009. All Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments evaluate and report performance against the Programme for Government goals and targets for which they have lead responsibility. The Programme for Government unit, along with PEDU colleagues, analyses that information to compile the review of progress published in the delivery reports.

Where a delivery report recommends a ministerial or official review of performance against specific goals or targets, the Programme for Government unit has responsibility for arranging that. Those reviews seek explanation where targets are in danger of not being hit and where remedial action might be taken to recover the position. The unit is presently working on the delivery report setting out the half-year position as at the end of September 2009. It will be brought to the Executive and the Assembly in the near future.

Looking ahead, the Programme for Government unit's work programme will be heavily committed to preparations for the next Programme for Government for 2011-14.

Mr McFarland: I thank the Acting First Minister for her reply. Given the £380 million in cuts announced by the Finance Minister last week, will she undertake to begin an Assembly-based process to fully rewrite the

Programme for Government? Surely a narrow departmental priority-based savings process cannot be allowed to damage programmes, particularly in the Health Department, which are of a high overall priority to the people of Northern Ireland.

The Acting First Minister: That question is premised on the belief that public service agreement targets sit very specifically within individual Departments, and that is simply not the case, because many public service agreements straddle a lot of Departments. Therefore, it is not a case of being in departmental silos. I could give the Member a very short answer in relation to the review of the Programme for Government, but I will not. Since we first published our Programme for Government in January 2009, there is no doubt that the economic and financial landscape has changed dramatically, but that does not mean that we should throw the baby out with the bath water. We review the targets on an ongoing basis, and we keep a very tight eye on them. When we feel that we are dropping behind on those targets, we have ministerial and official review meetings. I think that we have got the balance right; we are dealing with the issues before us, but we are not throwing everything out.

Mr Ross: Will the Acting First Minister advise the House how we can ensure that there is full departmental accountability on the public service agreement targets and in the aims of the Programme for Government?

The Acting First Minister: The last delivery report, which was presented to the Assembly in June 2009, identified five areas for review, because they appeared to be off trajectory, and there was going to be difficulty in delivering on those targets. Those areas, which the Member may be aware of, related to the promotion of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects; controlling greenhouse gas emissions; delivering sustainable development; regeneration; and productivity and tourism. Four review meetings have taken place, and those will be reported on in the second delivery report, which we expect to be with the Assembly in February.

Mrs Long: I thank the Acting First Minister for her update on progress. In some of the policy areas, such as sustainability and, particularly, cohesion, sharing and integration, there have been significant delays over what was envisaged in the Programme for Government. Is there any sense that we are moving closer to a point where we will be able to fulfil the commitments that were made in the Programme for Government around those issues?

The Acting First Minister: We continue to review the areas where we are not on trajectory to meet those Programme for Government targets.

I know that, in the past, some Members have indicated that they believe that those delivery reports are quite high level and that it is not possible to drill down into the reasons behind delays. However, to use my substantive Department as an example, the reports on the two public service agreements with which the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment (DETI) is involved, to review productivity and tourism, can be found on the Department's website. With those reports, it is possible to drill right down to the reasons why those public service agreements have not been fulfilled.

It is an exercise in being as open and transparent as possible about targets that we are not presently on trajectory to meet and in looking at how we can deal with those issues and find ways to improve on them. That is what we are engaged in doing.

Mr Attwood: At last week's meeting of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, we had a presentation from departmental officials who are responsible for disability issues, which are included in the Programme for Government. During that presentation, the officials confirmed that an interdepartmental working group to take forward disability issues that involve children is currently drafting its implementation plan for the period 2008-2011.

Mr Speaker: The Member must ask a question.

Mr Attwood: Is the Acting First Minister, in the short time that she has been in office, alarmed that her officials told an Assembly Committee that an implementation plan is only now being drafted for a period that began two years ago?

The Acting First Minister: As the Member will know, I am not entirely familiar with every single matter going on in the Department. However, I am happy to take that matter back to the Department and to try to find the reason why that implementation plan has been delayed. I will respond to the Member in writing.

OFMDFM: Administrative Costs

4. **Mr Shannon** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they intend to meet efficiency targets in relation to the administrative costs of their Department. (AQO 577/10)

The Acting First Minister: As part of the Budget 2008-2011 process, the Executive agreed that Departments would deliver 5% per annum administration efficiency savings over the years 2008-09 until 2010-11. It is planned that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will deliver around £3.5 million of administration savings by 2010-11.

Efficiency savings in OFMDFM are being delivered through improvement in, and refocusing of, the

delivery of programmes and functions. Structures and staffing levels in the Department are reviewed regularly to ensure that its work is delivered in the most efficient and effective way. I understand that the OFMDFM Committee will receive further information on the outcome of that work soon. Those measures resulted in a reduction in OFMDFM's administration cost out-turn in 2008-09 of £1.2 million less than the final out-turn position for 2007-08.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her response, in which she referred to savings. She also said that service would be delivered. That is good news. Will the Minister give some outline of how departmental restructuring will take place and how it will affect service delivery?

The Acting First Minister: The Member may be aware that there is already a moratorium on filling vacant posts. There is tight control on discretionary administration cost spend. That has resulted in an annualised administration cost saving of £750,000 in 2008-09 and 2009-2010. Administration cost savings in 2008-09, compared with those of 2007-08, comprised £834,000 of savings in staff costs and £343,000 of savings in other administration costs.

As I said in response to question 1, the size of the Department has always been an issue. However, I believe that some people do not realise how many OFMDFM staff are not based in Northern Ireland. For example, Norman Houston, who is an OFMDFM employee, does a great job in the US office — I know that from work with my substantive Department, DETI. I have already mentioned the Brussels office. Staff of the Planning Appeals Commission and other such bodies also fall under OFMDFM. Therefore, when people talk about the size of OFMDFM, they need to reflect on the fact that its staff may be based in places that they did not realise.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for the full and comprehensive answers that she has given. In fact, there may be an overlap in some of the figures that she has mentioned previously.

What proportion of the £11.1 million saving target for her Department, which was set in 2008 for the current comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, has been realised? Relative to the work of her Department in that, is there any implication for the staffing or the development of the Brussels office?

The Acting First Minister: The number of staff working in OFMDFM, which, as I said, are not all in Stormont Castle, has been reduced from 408 staff who were in post in September 2007 to 394 in December 2009. Recently, the Department concluded a strategic review of structures across OFMDFM and identified the potential to reduce staffing levels further. I understand that the Committee is being briefed on

those figures, so I do not want to get ahead of myself and give those numbers to the Assembly at this time. There is a substantial commitment to reduce staff, and, in conjunction with colleagues in the Department of Finance and Personnel, obviously, work is under way to effect changes as swiftly as possible.

I will write to the Member with a response to the specific question that he asked.

Mr O'Loan: The Acting First Minister referred to the size of her Department, which has been criticised. I agree that not all of that criticism is justified, though some may be. Considering the great size of that Department, does the Acting First Minister see that the efficiency savings mechanism has led to a better and greater quality of output from her Department? Has the mechanism of the exercise for producing those efficiencies, in particular, produced a significant culture change in the Department towards a more can-do attitude?

The Acting First Minister: Since devolution, it has been a challenge for all Departments to accept that change in culture. We have had to become used to local Ministers being in charge of Departments, rather than permanent secretaries and the part-time direct rule Ministers that we had for a number of years. I do not think that that is a challenge for OFMDFM solely; it is a challenge across the Northern Ireland Civil Service. I have found civil servants who are very much up to that challenge and who want to be a part of the new dispensation here in Northern Ireland and to be a part of delivering good government for all the people of Northern Ireland.

Commissioner for Older People

5. **Miss McIlveen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the progress on an older people's commissioner. (AQO 578/10)

The Acting First Minister: With your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister Robin Newton will answer that question.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Newton): I thank the Member for her question. We are committed to establishing a commissioner for older people. The Executive's Programme for Government made a commitment to provide a strong independent voice for older people. On 18 December 2007, the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced their intention to appoint an older people's commissioner. However, before a commissioner can be appointed, we need to bring forward legislation to the Assembly. As part of that process, I, along with junior Minister Kelly, launched the public consultation into the proposals to establish a commissioner for older people at an event

in the Everglades Hotel to celebrate the United Nations International Day of Older Persons. The consultation period ran from 1 October 2009 and concluded a few days ago on 7 January. The consultation included the policy proposals and the draft Bill, as well as commentary on the Bill clauses.

In November 2009, as part of the consultation, our Department conducted nine public consultation events across Northern Ireland. More than 400 people attended that series of events, and the level of engagement and participation by those who attended was extremely encouraging. I attended two of the events, and put on record my gratitude to the staff who took part in the consultations and to Dame Joan Harbison who chaired the events.

The consultation concluded on 7 January, and more than 70 written responses to the consultation have been received. Following a thorough analysis of the responses, the Department will publish a response to the consultation in due course. It is our intention to bring forward to the Executive, before the summer, a Bill for introduction to the Assembly.

The OFMDFM Committee will also have an opportunity to comment on the draft Bill prior to its introduction. The draft Bill will then progress through the Assembly. I affirm our commitment to delivering for older people and to ensuring that they are given a rightful place in our society.

Miss McIlveen has played a useful role in her engagement with Engage with Age, which held an event in the Long Gallery. She has, on a number of occasions, highlighted throughout the UK poverty issues that apply to older persons.

3.00 pm

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Common Agricultural Policy

1. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what approach her Department has taken to the reform of the common agricultural policy. (AQO 589/10)

2. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if, and when, she will initiate a public consultation process with relevant stakeholders regarding the future of the common agricultural policy post-2013, similar to that in the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 590/10)

12. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had

with her counterparts in the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the UK regarding the future of the common agricultural policy post 2013. (AQO 600/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 1, 2 and 12 together.

The future debate on the CAP is just beginning, with many issues of crucial importance to our industry up for discussion, particularly the size of the CAP budget and the future basis for the single farm payment. My officials held a meeting with stakeholders on 30 September 2009, at which the main issues likely to emerge from the next round of CAP reform were discussed. All those attending were asked to submit their views on further CAP reform to my Department.

I am keen to get the views of the industry, and I urge those who have not already responded to do so. Although there is a long way to go, the debate is getting under way. The Commission is expected to publish in mid-2010 a paper outlining its thinking. Legislative proposals are expected to follow in 2011, with the aim of reaching agreement in 2012. I will seek to hold formal consultations with stakeholders when the Commission's paper becomes available later this year and again in 2011, when the legislative proposals are made known. There will be plenty of opportunity for views to be made known to the Department.

The North/South Ministerial Council is proving to be a useful forum for discussing future CAP reform. We discussed the emerging issues at the last meeting on 18 November, when it was agreed that both Departments will continue to keep in close contact on those matters, which will certainly feature at future NSMC meetings.

There will be a meeting of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and devolved Ministers in the near future, and I assure Members that CAP reform will be on the agenda. DEFRA is well aware that I do not share its vision for future CAP reform, and I am considering making my own submission to the Commission when the proposals for CAP reform emerge.

We achieved a good outcome from the previous negotiation on the CAP health check, and I am committed to getting the best deal possible for farmers and the wider rural community across the North in the forthcoming CAP negotiations.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for her answer. She well knows that my view is that ensuring support for agriculture in Northern Ireland should not compromise efforts at international development. Bearing that in mind, it is important that any consultation is not focused purely on the industry but takes in other sections of society.

In light of the question marks over the sustainability of the CAP, particularly following European enlargement, can the Minister assure me that, as well as arguing the case for farmers, she is preparing the ground to ensure that we rebalance our agriculture sector in the event that changes in the CAP are forced on us?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I will do all that I can to resist the changes that the Member suggests might occur. Although DEFRA has a strong view on areas such as phasing out the single farm payment, it is neither my view nor the view of my colleagues in Scotland and Wales that that should happen, and it is certainly not the view of colleagues in the South of Ireland.

With regard to developing countries, it is important to remember that the CAP has been reformed over the years to make it less trade-distorting, which has been a key demand of developing countries. The introduction of the single farm payment, which is not linked to production, is an example of that. However, any WTO deal must be fair and reasonable for the agriculture sector, and the Member knows my views on that as well as I know his.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's response. What discussions, if any, has she had with her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland to address the post-2013 issues, given that we are on one island and that, in the past, we have had irregularities North and South about the way forward?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The CAP affects all farmers across the island of Ireland. Therefore, it makes sense for both Departments to co-operate closely on the issue. Given that farmers North and South have common interests, I am of the view that we should have frequent discussions on our policy approach.

On issues where there is agreement, there are opportunities to collaborate in attempting to influence the Commission's position, and I intend to use any avenue that is open to me in trying to get the best deal for farmers in the North. However, in every discussion that I have with the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, CAP reform is on the agenda, and we have frequently talked about how that affects farmers across the island of Ireland.

Mr P J Bradley: Is there any indication so far that the UK Government are willing to show sympathy for farmers in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Along with colleagues in Scotland and Wales, I will do my best to influence Westminster. At times, I feel sorry for English farmers because DEFRA's position is not very sympathetic to them. My Department, along with its counterparts in Scotland

and Wales, has a divergent view from that of DEFRA, and that is to the benefit of farmers.

A reform of the CAP is not widely supported across Europe, and the South, for example, is discussing its position on the CAP with other member states. DEFRA seems to be out of kilter with many of the other member states on the issue.

Mr Armstrong: Does the Minister think that it would be a mistake for the single farm payment to become a flat-rate system across the European Union?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Given that our average payment per hectare is slightly higher than the overall European average, the Department would need to carefully consider how that would be worked out. An analysis of the period from 2000 to 2002 forms the historic basis for the single farm payment, and the further we move away from that period, the less that analysis reflects our modern agriculture industry.

As the withdrawal of the single farm payment would have a negative impact on the industry here, my Department will argue against the DEFRA proposal and will seek to extend the single farm payment well into the future. Indeed, were it not for that payment, our farmers would not make any money; it makes the industry sustainable. Therefore, the Department will argue for the retention of the single farm payment, but it will examine a simpler and better way of paying it to farmers that will not necessarily be based on the historic rate. However, there is a long way to go, and much consultation must be had, and I want to hear the views of the industry during that process.

Cold Weather: Farmers

3. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what support she will provide to farmers who are struggling with their crops and livestock due to the freezing weather conditions. (AQO 591/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The extremely bad weather, including the recent flooding in Fermanagh and the more recent freezing weather conditions across the North, has caused great inconvenience to people here. My thoughts are with everyone affected, and my heart goes out to farmers and those who live in rural communities who have suffered disruption. I could not get out of my driveway for a few days recently, and it really was a difficult period in which to be a rural dweller.

There are currently no Executive hardship payments or compensation schemes available to cover farmers' losses or the additional costs of feeding animals during severe weather. My Department is facing significant

financial resource pressures across the board. I have considered all avenues of financial support from Europe, including state aid and the European Solidarity Fund; however, those are not feasible in the circumstances. I will be making representations to Executive colleagues, and, if agreement can be reached and money found, I will direct officials to assess the damage that has been incurred.

My Department, through the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise's development advisers, is available to provide technical support to farmers who are dealing with problems that have arisen because of the freezing weather conditions.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for her answer. Everyone will concur with her comments about the problems that are faced by the farming community in particular. However, will she confirm that the message that she is sending out to those who have suffered the extremes of weather over the past weeks and months is that no hardship payments are available from her Department's funds? Furthermore, some of the extreme weather was experienced several weeks ago, so why has the Minister not yet put in a bid to DFP to extract moneys to help those who have suffered? Why has the Minister delayed, given that those matters arose a number of weeks ago?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As the Member is aware, my Department is facing significant financial resource pressures. Given that, I have no plans to consider making further hardship payments from the DARD budget. Following the exceptional flooding in August 2008, DARD assessed the damage to cereals, vegetable and potato crops. The cost of that damage was estimated at £1 million. I reported the findings to the Executive, and I secured one-off funding of £500,000 for flooding hardship in agriculture. The subsequent scheme provided hardship payments to those who were worst affected. When I announced those hardship payments, I made it clear that the measure was a one-off and that in future the industry would have to look to other means of addressing loss, such as insurance provision.

I know that the Member is looking for a cheap headline, but I am trying to benefit farmers. I know what the fiscal situation is across the board, and I have said that I will bring the matter to the Executive. However, there is a need to balance and manage expectations.

Mr McCallister: Does the Minister agree that it is crucial that she does not delay getting the assessment made on farms, particularly when dealing with potato growers? Will she give an undertaking in the House that her officials will be sent to farms to make that assessment immediately, so that she can be helped to

build a stronger case to her Executive colleagues? Will she also raise with her Executive colleagues the wider issues that may arise, particularly, for example, in processing potato crisps and in getting supply here in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I appreciate the Member's question. As I said to the Member who spoke previously, there is a need to manage expectations. If I send officials to do the assessment, the expectation will be that the Department can make money available. If the Executive tell me that they can make a hardship payment available, we will do that. I do not want to raise people's hopes and say that such money will be available.

It is estimated that around 6% of the seed potato crop has not been harvested and that it may now be adversely affected by the recent weather conditions. Estimates indicated that around 10% to 15% of ware crops remain to be harvested. Harvesting of root crops — for example, carrots — has proved difficult, and crops may now be adversely affected. There may be some knock-on effect on processors. I visited Tayto a couple of years ago. If that company has problems getting raw materials, its representatives should speak to me. However, at this stage I am not hearing that from the company. At this stage, we know that there are the losses in those areas.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answers. Although she answered a number of questions that I wanted to raise, one question has not been asked. What impact will the cold weather have on the prices that consumers pay for the crops that have been so severely affected over the winter period?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Although we are all consumers, in my role as Agriculture Minister I have to think about the prices that farmers get. There have been times when food prices have not reflected input costs. Therefore, although it is not in my gift to influence food prices, I keep a close eye on those prices and costs to ensure that there are no disparities between the two. There may be a slight increase in the price of some crops that have been affected by the weather. I am not saying that there will necessarily be such an increase, but my first priority is to ensure that farmers get a return on the crop that they have invested money into growing and producing.

Mr Shannon: There are great concerns about the amount of crops that will be lost to farmers. We all know the issues concerning cost, and the Minister knows those as well as anyone else, but I understand that the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly have discussed making provision to help the farmers, regardless of whether they are involved with crops or

with stock. Can the Minister give the Assembly some indication of discussions she has had with the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly to see how she can help in the way that they have?

3.15 pm

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I have not held discussions with the Scottish or Welsh Ministers on that issue. Conditions were an awful lot worse in those areas, and I know that Members were watching the news reports over Christmas and hearing that temperatures in the Scottish Highlands were equivalent to those in the North Pole and that it was colder in Scotland than Siberia. Conditions were extremely bad in Scotland, and I expect that the Minister there will take that into consideration. Our conditions were bad, but, thankfully, we got off lightly compared with Scotland and other parts of Ireland.

EU Temporary Community Framework

4. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what representations she has made to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs regarding the European Commission providing funds to farmers under the temporary crisis framework until the end of August 2010. (AQO 592/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: You entered the Chamber just in time to ask your question, Thomas. My Department has been in contact with DEFRA to confirm that no European Commission funding is available to farmers under the temporary community framework. The framework was adopted by the Commission on 17 December 2008 as a temporary measure to provide member states with additional possibilities within European state aid rules to tackle the effects of the current financial and economic crisis with their own resources.

Originally, the framework did not apply to farming, but it was modified on 28 October 2009 to allow member states to make one-off payments of up to €15,000 to farmers to address problems arising from the credit crunch. Any payments must be financed from the member states' own resources and can be made until 31 December 2010. Member states are required to notify their intention to avail themselves of the modification to the temporary community framework and obtain approval from the Commission. The notification must contain agriculture-specific data to demonstrate that the agriculture sector has been adversely affected by the current economic difficulties, and DEFRA is working on a notification on behalf of Britain and the North of Ireland.

Mr Burns: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will the Minister explain why the French and the Dutch

received approval to support their farmers by the end of 2009 but our farmers have had to wait? Is there any specific reason for that?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As I said, DEFRA is working on a notification, and, obviously, that has not yet been submitted to the Commission. We must understand that there are differences, and, although the euro exchange rate gain had a positive impact on the DEFRA figures, that will not have been the case for other member states.

DEFRA is having difficulty with the data and is trying to make a strong case. The notification is about asking for permission; no decision has yet been made on whether anything will come of that. If a decision were made in favour of granting that permission, the money would have to come out of our budgets. As I said earlier, this budgetary situation is extremely poor, and we have not been able to meet some pressures. The notification will be submitted, and, if permission is granted, we will take it from there.

Mr Kinahan: Given that DEFRA is working on an application on behalf of the UK, what assistance, whether in the form of guidance or expertise, is the Minister offering to her colleagues in London?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The most important information that I can provide them with is our figures. My officials are working with them on that.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can aid under the temporary framework be targeted at one particular sector? For example, could it be targeted at the beef sector?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: No. The temporary framework requires member states to demonstrate that the measure is necessary, appropriate and proportionate to remedy a serious disturbance in the economy of the respective member state. The Commission considers that measures that are targeted at one subsector only are not likely to fulfil that condition.

Mr Speaker: The Member who was to ask question 5 is not in his place.

Better Regulation and Simplification Review

6. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she will publish her action plan following the 'Better Regulation and Simplification Review'. (AQO 594/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Previously, I outlined that a review would take place of the 86 recommendations that apply to all areas of the Department's work with the agrifood

sector, including areas in which we apply European legislation.

Informal consultation ended on 30 September 2009, and it had been expected that the DARD response to that report could have been published in the autumn. That was delayed, however, because a substantial proportion of the recommendations require further investigation before they can be implemented and some present significant legal obstacles or involve disproportionate costs. Better regulation is still a clear priority for my Department, and I would expect the response to the review to be available by the end of March.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her response. Those of us who live in towns fully appreciate the important role that farmers play in caring for the environment. However, will the Minister assure the House that there will be full co-ordination between the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of the Environment to ensure a better deal for farmers and the environment?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: We will be co-operating fully with each other. The majority of the recommendations were for DARD rather than DOE, but we will, obviously, work with DOE with a view to protecting farmers' livelihood and the environment. Farmers are keenly conscious about ensuring that what they do is not detrimental to land or water quality.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that update. Given that farmers have to abide by requirements for quite a number of inspections throughout the year and some are hit with three or four inspections, will the Minister assure the House that she will look seriously at the prospect of a single inspection regime as an outcome of the process?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As the Member is aware, since the introduction of the single farm payment in 2005, my Department has worked to streamline its inspections process. At present, DARD inspectors undertake land eligibility and cross-compliance good agricultural and environmental condition requirements (GAEC) inspections in one visit. The inspections that are undertaken by the quality assurance branch on food and feed law go towards meeting Food Standards Agency targets. The cross-compliance inspections that are undertaken by vets help to meet other legislative targets set for cattle and sheep inspections. Those veterinary service visits cover a range of animal-related issues such as identification, registration, disease control and welfare.

I appreciate that that approach increases the number of individual visits. However, the way in which those inspections are divided means that it is unlikely that any farmer is being inspected for all land eligibility

and cross-compliance requirements. That reduces the amount of time that any farmer has to spend at inspections. My Department continues to monitor its approach and will consider further refinements where possible. Like the Member, however, I am keen that we keep inspections to a minimum and allow farmers to get on with what they do best.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In her update, the Minister mentioned certain legal elements. Will she assure the House that progress will continue unabated through to her target date, given that her previous answer suggested that there were some legal implications?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: A total of 52 recommendations fall specifically to DARD, of which 35 are already identified and can be implemented. Indeed, many are already being implemented as ongoing developments within various work areas. Some 41 of the 85 recommendations require further investigation to identify the possibility for their introduction by DARD and/or other Departments. So far, nine recommendations are likely to be rejected for various reasons, including legal obstacles and disproportionate costs.

The informal consultation on the panel's review ended on 30 September 2009. My Department received three responses, which will be taken into consideration in the formal response to the review, which will be published in the coming months. We have done our best in the meantime to ensure that other areas of work — for example, the process for applying to the countryside management scheme or the farm modernisation programme — have been kept simple and effective to ensure that we are not introducing extra administrative or bureaucratic burdens on farmers but starting as we mean to go on.

Mrs D Kelly: There were two recommendations in the review on which I wish to focus. One was that there should be a charter of farmers' rights. Will the Minister confirm whether her Department intends to publish such a charter? The other was to reduce the administrative burden from £15 million to £10 million by 2013. Will the Minister be taking forward that recommendation?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I prefer not to pre-empt the outcome of the review. We are looking at all the recommendations to see how we can bring them forward, but, if the Member asks me that question again after the review has been published, I will be happy to answer.

Dog Control Legislation

7. **Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the progress made

in bringing forward new legislation to deal with the problem of dangerous dogs and to improve wider dog control. (AQO 595/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I launched a public consultation on my proposals for changes to dog control legislation on 23 November last year, and on the same day in the Assembly I set out the background to those proposals and the issues that they seek to address.

The new dog control Bill will provide new control measures that will promote and support responsible dog ownership and will provide local councils with new tools to deal with irresponsible owners and problem dogs. Consultation on the proposals ends on 1 February 2010. The relevant documents, and information on how to respond, may be found on the Department's website.

As part of the consultation exercise, my officials are holding a series of public meetings this month to explain the proposals and to encourage stakeholders to respond. Last week, we hosted meetings in Armagh and Derry, and two further meetings will take place: the first tonight in the Killyhevlin Hotel in Enniskillen, and the second on Wednesday in the Ramada Hotel at Shaw's Bridge in Belfast. Further details of those events are on the DARD website. I got a wee plug in there for those events.

I encourage as many people as possible to submit their views on my proposals, and, following the completion of the public consultation, I will take into account all the responses before finalising my proposals and seeking agreement from the Executive to draft a new dog control Bill.

Ms J McCann: Will the Minister please outline the key elements of her proposals for change in the dog control legislation?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: There is quite a bit to it. Among the proposals are the following: domestic dogs should be microchipped; the dog licence fee should rise to £12.50, with some concessionary rates, so that councils can recover more of the cost of providing dog warden services; certain fines and penalties should be increased; and councils should be allowed to retain the proceeds from fixed penalties to support the dog warden service, rather than handing the proceeds back to central government. Details of those proposals are set out in the consultation paper published on the Department's website.

Mr Gardiner: The Minister spoke of consultation with the public, but will she enlighten me as to what consultation she has had with the 26 councils?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I suppose that that is where we started.

One of the first things that I did in proceeding on the dog control legislation was to hold a very informative meeting to which the chief executives and dog wardens of all 26 councils were invited, so that we could get a good sense of what was important to them. They helped us to put together the framework. We then did further work with some of the chief executives. They were very much to the fore in developing this policy, and I thank them for the help that they have given me. They are the key people, working at the coalface, from whom we need to hear. We are very grateful for the help and support that they have given us.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for what she has said so far; it has been encouraging to hear it. I ask two specific questions. Will the consultation include the issue of problem behaviour versus banned breeds? Will the legislation focus on that?

I have previously identified a loophole in the legislation regarding dog-on-dog attacks as opposed to dog-on-livestock attacks, for which there is a more robust approach. Will that also be considered as part of the review and consultation?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Dog-on-dog attacks are included in the consultation. We recognise that they are a problem. There is also a specific reference to dog attacks on guide dogs, and I had a bad experience when dealing with that issue in my constituency a number of years ago.

The Member also asked about banned breeds. I would retain the ban on dogs bred for fighting, as I firmly believe that it provides an important protection for the public, particularly children. Some have criticised the ban, but I agree with the stakeholders who claim that pit bull terriers are genetically equipped to be an instrument of torture and are bred to kill or be killed. They have, for example, a very high pain threshold and a powerful jaw structure developed specifically for fighting. The risks posed by the banned breeds are qualitatively much higher than for other dogs. Therefore, I believe that the ban must remain in place, as was proven by the two most recent attacks which led to the deaths of Ellie Lawrenson and John Paul Massey in Merseyside.

3.30 pm

Existing legislation provides an exemption from destruction for individual dogs of banned types if they are not considered to be a danger and if certain strict conditions are met. During the review, I heard concerns about the prolonged nature of the court proceedings required before an exemption can be granted and about how that can result in a dog spending a lengthy period in a dog pound, which may harm the dog concerned and place a sizeable cost on ratepayers. The new legislation, therefore, proposes to address those welfare and enforcement issues by streamlining the

current arrangements through a change in the law to permit councils to exempt dogs of a banned type if they are satisfied that the dog's behaviour gives no cause for concern, while using the licensing system to impose strict conditions on the dog and its owner.

Mrs M Bradley: If the proposals are implemented, how will the Minister ensure that responsible dog owners, especially those on a low income and older people, will not incur extra costs?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: My proposals will put measures in place that ensure that that does not happen. First, there will be concessionary rates for dog licences. Secondly, compulsory microchipping of domestic dogs will mean that dogs can be traced back to their owners and kin. Responsible dog ownership is a common thread throughout all the proposals, and that is where we are trying to get to. We recognise that responsible dog owners should not be adversely affected. The legislation should, therefore, encourage more people who are not being responsible — for example, those who have dogs that are used to intimidate or harm other people — to become responsible.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Compulsory Voting

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the positive effect that compulsory voting has had on democracy in the Commonwealth of Australia; and calls on Her Majesty's Government to consider introducing similar rules for elections in the United Kingdom. — [*Mr Kinahan.*]

Mr Hamilton: Even though I take a contrary position to the motion, I value Mr Kinahan's contribution in proposing it. He took a thoughtful approach not only to the subject of compulsory voting but to participation in democracy in general. His opening remarks are worth reflecting on in that broader context, if not on the specifics of compulsory voting.

Although Mr Kinahan talked about compulsory voting for the electorate, he did not refer to compulsory voting for Members of the Assembly. I welcome today's motion from the Ulster Unionist Benches if that heralds a change in attitude by its Members to voting in the Chamber. Everybody who has considered the figures knows that the Ulster Unionist Party's record of voting in Divisions in the Lobbies of the House is pretty shameful in comparison with the record of other parties. There is a rich irony in the Ulster Unionist Party calling for the electorate to vote on a compulsory basis to elect Members to the Assembly, when its Members do not actually go through the Lobbies and represent their electorate during frequent Divisions on various issues in the House.

I am as forlorn as other Members about the habitual low turnout in elections right across the Western World. Constituencies east of the Bann such as mine regularly have, if not the worst turnout, the second or third worst turnout in Northern Ireland. I think of the sacrifice that people have made in the past, particularly during two world wars, when people fought to preserve and establish democracy or of people who put their lives on the line and made the ultimate sacrifice in Northern Ireland to ensure that, no matter what went on, we were able to express our democratic rights. When I see images of people in Iraq and Afghanistan, no matter about the circumstances of those conflicts, who, for the first time ever, have a free democratic right to vote and who put their life and limb at risk to do so, I get annoyed and irritated about the very low turnout in elections in Northern Ireland.

Mr B McCrea: Since the Member had a jibe at the UUP, which I will deal with in my speech, will he offer any explanation about why the people of his constituency do not turn out to vote rather than just lamenting that? Does it have to do with the quality of candidates?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Hamilton: I would have thought that the Member would have waited until Mr McNarry was here to have a go about the quality of candidates. That is an issue that he may want to take up with his colleague. I accept the point that there is an onus.

This is the crux of the matter: is it a right or is it a duty to vote? I err on the side of voting being a right. Although we all might get annoyed and irritated by very low turnouts, people have the right not to vote. That is their freedom, and clearly a large percentage of people choose to exercise that freedom. As Dr Farry said, I would much rather have a very serious and thoughtful engagement with an electorate who, having considered who they want to vote for, come out and actively participate, rather than force people to vote and them perhaps not using their vote in a sensible way.

There is an issue around whether we, as individual politicians, parties or the party political system itself, do enough to attract people to vote. That is something that we should all ponder. There is an obligation on us all, individually and collectively, to do more to engage the public in the democratic process.

The motion notes the "positive effect" that compulsory voting has had in Australia. However, I do not see Australia regularly being held up as a paragon of democratic virtue. Are we to believe that Australia is a better, brighter democracy than, for example, its neighbour New Zealand or, indeed, anywhere else in the world? The proposer said that everybody needed to be squeaky clean and whiter than white. However, I do not think that Australia is free from political scandal. Looking at every general election that there has been in Australia, even with compulsory voting, one can see that there are 5% of people who regularly do not vote.

As has been said by other Members, there are, perhaps, reasons to consider enforcing compulsory voting. However, there are people who say that, for religious reasons, they will not vote. Although I disagree with that point of view, in a society that has freedom of religion, are we to force those people to vote? I think that the 5% to 10% of people who do not vote will include a large percentage of vulnerable people. Are we to punish vulnerable people in society simply because they have not voted? The regular figure for non-participation in Australia is 5%, which equates to approximately 75,000 people in Northern Ireland. Who will pursue and who will pay for the pursuit of the 75,000 people who have not voted? That is why, in the very few countries that had or still have compulsory voting, a great many of them do not enforce it and a number have retreated from the position.

By all means, we should look at the ease of voting, the duration of voting, the method of voting, whether we use more modern technology and whether we change, alter or add to the locations in which people vote.

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

Mr Hamilton: However, I think that compulsory voting is an infringement of people's right not to vote as much as it has anything to do with encouraging people to vote.

Mr B McCrea: Questions have arisen as to why people do not vote and around the benefits of getting 100% of people to vote. I am really disappointed by the contribution from the Member who spoke previously, because it is cheap shots such as that which disillusion the electorate. On the one hand, some Members are saying that the motion is good and that they thank Mr Kinahan; on the other hand, others take cheap shots that are of no particular benefit. I expect more from Members, and I think that the electorate expect more.

When it comes to the issue of compulsory voting being fundamentally anti-democratic, some Members argued that people should not be forced to vote. However, there is an issue, which has not been brought up yet, around jury service. Jury service is compulsory because it is in our interests to make sure that it happens. In dealing with the issue of democracy, perhaps we need a fundamental review of what we mean by democracy. There was a time when we talked about first past the post being the best voting method; then we had STV, which does not necessarily bring forward the results that people expect and which many people do not understand. As we deal with the RPA, we even get into the issue of gerrymandering constituencies to get a particular result. All those issues bear discussion and proper, intelligent debate, and I thank Mr Kinahan for proposing a motion that allows us to do that.

Mrs Long: Does the Member concede that, although all those issues bear scrutiny, discussion and debate, compulsory voting does not address any of them?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr B McCrea: I cannot concede that at the moment, but I am prepared to have the debate. It is right that we, as the body politic, should discuss all the options.

The rational argument for people not voting is that they think that one vote does make any difference, while going to a polling station to vote will have a cost. Therefore, the rational thought is not to vote. What I am saying is pure logic, so I am surprised that Mrs Long is shaking her head. If we do not get people responsibly involved in society, we all lose. That is the real issue.

How can the problem be addressed if we are not going to make voting compulsory? Obama was responsible for a huge surge in the uptake of the franchise. He did that by providing inspiration and enthusiasm, impressing the electorate, firing the

imagination and offering leadership, freshness and change. I challenge all the Members present: are we offering those things? Is Mr Hamilton offering those things? Are those the qualities that people see when they look in the Chamber and see Members reading party-prepared briefs with their head down, churning out the same old stuff? Does that really inspire people to change and to vote? Do people look at the Chamber and say, "Thank goodness those 108 people are up there looking after our interests"? The disdain in which people hold this institution does not bear thinking about.

At least Mr Kinahan had the courage to offer a possible solution. If implemented, I suspect that his proposal would provoke a response. People might say that they would not vote for any —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: Sorry, I have already taken an intervention.

Mr Kinahan's proposal would provoke a response and engage people in the democratic process, and that would be a good thing.

All the research shows that one important driver in making people vote is whether their neighbours know whether they voted. Many Members will have had sight of the marked register. That causes alarm to many people who ask, "You know whether I vote or not?" We do not know how people have voted, but we could consider publishing the list. Why hide it? We all have it. We could publish the register. Voting would be entirely up to the individual, but people would know whether he or she did so.

I listened to Members saying that they agree with the idea of increasing the franchise and getting people out to vote but that they are not sure that compulsory voting is the right way to do that. I think that that was the point that Naomi Long put to me. She said that compulsory voting would not address the points that I raised. Maybe we need to have a proper debate on the issue. Maybe other Members will table motions asking how we can improve the reputation of this place and how we can repair the damage that has been done by the expenses scandal and other issues. If Members table such motions, there will be something to talk about.

So that Mr Kinahan does not walk into the Aye Lobby on his own and because he has brought a really important issue to the House for debate, I will vote with him. I ask other Members to vote with him to show that they have brains and will support an innovative stance.

3.45 pm

Mr Attwood: As John Dallat outlined, the SDLP opposes the motion, although it has sympathy with its sentiment. One thing that we should discuss is lowering the voting age to 16 years. That acute issue is worthy

of conversation and of our trying to convince other parties of in order to move forward. As I said, my party has sympathy with the motion and with the sentiment expressed by Mr Kinahan. As he said in his opening remarks, there are more than enough reasons, including those of current vintage, why people may be alienated from politics, especially in the North.

Mr Kinahan, rightly, referred to the suffragette movement's struggle for the female franchise. However, this issue is much closer to home. Our community in the North has engaged for many decades in a proud struggle to deal with issues of democracy: the campaign for "one person, one vote"; the campaign to stop vote stealing; and the campaign to stop double and triple registration. However, more than anything else, hundreds of thousands of people from all sides of this island have waged a campaign to resist the anti-national and anti-democratic efforts of people in government and in illegal organisations to use threats and terror. This island, especially this part of it, has a proud history of asserting the requirements of democracy, including the opportunity to vote.

Although the debate has narrowed in on compulsory voting, we must acknowledge that all our communities have — it may be more acute in the nationalist community — a deep culture of democratic participation. Regardless of the levels of participation in elections, there is a proud tradition and culture of wider participation. Although we may be upset that people do not exercise their right to vote, we should be proud that many people participate in their communities.

The credit union movement originated in the nationalist community as a result of the initial efforts of John Hume and others. That has spread, and credit unions are now being run or assisted by the marching Orders. That movement provides good examples of people's involvement in community life in a way that deepens participation and democracy. That is apparent in the various sporting organisations to which many Members belong, particularly the GAA. Such organisations are an essential element of people's participation in their communities and are an outworking of democracy in its fullest sense. Therefore, we should be careful to balance our disappointment at the numbers who vote against the numbers who participate in many other ways to maintain stability and to develop our society.

I agree that it might be more productive to have a conversation about ways to increase voting. Sinn Féin suggested the use of mobile polling stations, and Simon Hamilton suggested the use of new technology. Other Members suggested voting on Friday or Saturday, as is the case in the South. However, we should not ignore the elephant in the room: what will really motivate people to be involved in our political parties and in politics? The principles that underpin

how we conduct our political affairs must be right, and our systems of government must be ethical and must have an ethical way of dealing with the past. Moreover, when the people of Ireland vote in a democratic way for political inclusion, we must not go down the road of exclusion from government. When we have devolution, we must make it work properly. Those are the real standards and tests against which we should be judged.

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

Mr Attwood: The community will judge us on whether those standards and tests deepen our democracy.

Lord Browne: I oppose the motion that we consider compulsory voting in the United Kingdom. Before I explain my reasons for opposing it, I want to make it clear that I am no less concerned than the proposer of the motion and his supporter Mr McCrea about the continuing decline in participation in the democratic process in the United Kingdom, particularly in Northern Ireland, over the past 20 years.

It has been suggested that the disappearance of a clear distinction between left and right in politics is part of the explanation, but that is not an important factor here. Voting fatigue because of the numerous elections that we have here is a much more important factor. Be that as it may, I am convinced that compelling the electorate to vote is not an appropriate remedy.

Over the past 20 years, and particularly since the Labour Government took office in 1997, the freedoms of the ordinary British citizen have been continuously circumscribed and eroded. In some circumstances, those restrictions on freedom may be unavoidable: obviously, the activity of violent and fanatical terrorist organisations cannot be tolerated. However, I believe that unnecessary restriction on the freedom of speech in the name of political correctness represents a very dangerous authoritarian tendency.

Another example of the growing intrusion of the state into the private lives of individual British citizens can be found in health and safety legislation. I know that many of us have read about the health and safety officers who, in order to prevent the over-consumption of salt, confiscated salt cellars from fish-and-chip shops and replaced them with appropriate salt shakers that had fewer holes in them, at the considerable cost to the taxpayer of some £2,000. Presumably, customers simply shook the new shakers for a longer time.

Does anyone in the Chamber really believe that placing further restrictions on individual liberties will encourage the people of Northern Ireland to realise that the right to vote is, indeed, a privilege to be cherished and utilised? I fear that, instead, non-participating voters would resent the Government's

authoritarian attempt to dictate how they should use any free time that they have on an election day to play golf, for example, or go to a restaurant. It is a sad fact that people only appreciate their right to participate in elections when that right is taken away from them.

I can accept many of the points that were made by the proposer and his supporter about attracting people to vote. They made useful suggestions, for instance, about how young people might be persuaded to vote. We should re-examine postal voting and consider the siting of polling stations in more accessible locations such as supermarkets.

The debate has been useful, because it has opened up discussions —

Mr Weir: I have some sympathy for people who say, for example, that we should try to make polling stations more accessible, but I am not convinced that that is at the root of the problem. All parties have had experience of taking elderly people to the polling stations — people who are very determined to exercise their democratic right but have physical difficulty in getting in — only to see people who live next door to the polling station but do not bother to vote. There may be ways to increase the availability of voting methods, but I wonder whether the key problem is the willingness of people to vote rather than the availability of polling.

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

Lord Browne: We must examine all the ways in which we can encourage people to play a more active part in the democratic process. As politicians, we must accept some of the blame for the apathy of a sizeable proportion of the electorate. We all have a duty to encourage active involvement by all sections of the electorate. Nevertheless, I am not convinced that compulsion is the right approach. We should encourage people to vote, not coerce them.

Ms Purvis: I thank Mr Kinahan for proposing the motion. The debate is worth having, particularly as we consider the political situation in Northern Ireland and our struggles to make this relatively new democratic system one that encourages the participation of everyone who lives here.

The motion asks us to note:

“the positive effect that compulsory voting has had on democracy in ... Australia”.

I know that there are those who think that Australia offers a positive model for democratic participation, but there are many who do not agree. There are those who view compulsory voting as anti-democratic because it inhibits the right of voters to vote with their feet. I do not agree. I think that the contribution of all people in Northern Ireland is vital, and it is worth looking at all options that would support that.

There has been much discussion recently about community confidence and its influence on whether and how the Assembly will fully function. If confidence is to be a determining factor, that raises the question of whether we have confidence that the electoral mandates currently at play in this Chamber truly represent the wishes of the entire adult population of Northern Ireland. Can we really assume that a political party truly carries a mandate when only a fraction of the population shows up at an election? At least one of the successful candidates in the recent European election was very confident about the mandate that they carried, even with a voter turnout of less than 43%. That is worse than any American election.

When voter participation declines, it is typically those whom the Government need to hear from most who walk away from voting first. Voter turnout is already unequal among socio-economic groups. People who are more affluent, older and have more access to education are more likely to vote. That is great news for those who are already participating in the electoral process; their participation is to be encouraged and supported. However, the other side of the equation — those who do not participate in the democratic process — is a cause for concern. It is not possible to look at the Assembly and say that the needs and opinions of young people are well represented here.

The diversity situation is equally bad. Women make up the majority of the population in Northern Ireland but are not represented in the Chamber. The answer to these questions lies predominantly with the parties, although the electorate may have their own thoughts. A compulsory system of voting might create the opportunity for the electorate to make clearer demands on what they want the Assembly to do and who they want in it.

We are all complicit in an environment where electoral turnout is steadily declining. We know that, when politics gets ugly, it affects the voters. Voters who respond to fear, anger or discord are motivated to turn out and vote. The same environment has the opposite effect on more moderate voters, who look at dysfunctional politics, think that it has nothing to do with them and stay at home. It is easy to end up with a voting result that more heavily reflects the motivation of angrier voters than that of more moderate voters.

There are a few options that could address that. The first is for political parties to stop using fear as a communication and voter-mobilisation tactic. However, old habits die hard, and I am not holding my breath. Another option is to find new motivators and a system that is supportive of all voters, so that those who think that politics is not for them know that it is and that their voices need to be heard. A system of compulsory voting may be the way to do that.

As regards the right not to vote, I have always thought that the best way to send a “none of the above” message to the politicians and candidates is to show up and make one’s feelings clear on the ballot paper. Some of the most insightful political statements that I have ever read have been scrawled across ballot papers. An official record of dissent or disillusion is worthwhile. I thank Mr Kinahan for raising the issue. I support the motion.

Mrs Long: I had not originally intended to participate in the debate, but, having listened to the tone of it, I decided that I would. I am slightly concerned that the motion talks about the positive effect that compulsory voting has had on democracy in the Commonwealth of Australia. I am not aware of any facts or figures that would suggest that to be the case. I am not aware that there is less political cynicism in Australia, that levels of corruption are lower or that transparency in the process is any greater. Nor am I convinced that interest and engagement in the political system is any greater. It is true that the number of people who come out to put a mark on a ballot paper is greater, but one does not equal the other. I am concerned about the comparison that was drawn between two slightly different things.

4.00 pm

There was discussion about whether voting is a duty or a right, which was something of a false debate. Voting is both a duty and a right. First and foremost, voting is a right. It is important that we ensure that people have an opportunity to cast a vote and influence the system to the degree that one vote can. No one can expect to turn the tide of an election by going out to vote when thousands of other people are doing the same, so a degree of realism is required. However, as one of a number of other people who vote, an individual can certainly have an impact on the system. We need to encourage people to recognise that the public can change the debate during an election campaign. They can move an issue on according to how they vote, and the opportunity to vote thereby enables people to exert influence.

Voting is not only a right. Like every other right, it comes with a responsibility. The right to vote comes with the duty that it is exercised responsibly. In a number of elections, I have seen marks made on the paper that are nothing to do with voting for individuals and have more to do with lampooning the candidates. A system that compels people to turn up at a polling station and perhaps do something frivolous is not particularly helpful, nor does it encourage a culture of responsible exercise of franchise. I would prefer people to be engaged with the system. People should be able to vote, and it is an important right.

I agree with Mr Attwood that the right to vote should be extended to anyone who is eligible to pay

tax or join the Army. Once people reach the age of 16, they should have the right to exercise their vote, whether or not they choose to do so. However, that belief is a long way from thinking that people should be compelled to turn up to vote. There are practical things that we could do to improve the situation. For example, registration could be made simpler. The registration process in Northern Ireland seems to be in constant flux. People do not know whether they need to register more or less frequently because the system keeps changing, and that is unhelpful.

We also need to make it easier for people to have the right ID. There have been instances of people who are qualified to vote in an election turning up at a polling station but being refused on the grounds that their passport from another Commonwealth country was not a valid piece of identification. Despite the fact that the Electoral Office held their names on the register and had accepted their right to vote as a citizen of that country, their ID from that Commonwealth country was not regarded as valid proof of their identity. Polling stations could be made more accessible, and absentee voting could be made easier to give people who cannot get to a polling station a better opportunity to vote.

Those are all valid measures that could be taken to make the voting process easier. However, I am not sure that people getting to the polling station and marking the paper is the biggest barrier. The biggest barrier is lack of interest. Some Members have characterised that lack of interest as a sign of people's disillusionment with politics, but there is more to it than that. One could say that the people whom we, as elected representatives, hear from most are those who are most disillusioned with the system. People are far more likely to come out to complain than to affirm the position of someone with whom they agree.

It is hard to know what does and does not motivate people to come out to vote. However, I have no doubt that the perception that politicians do not respond to the issues that are raised, that they do not listen and that they do not engage with people honestly and openly is likely to be a turn-off to the political system. It is not only how we engage with our constituents that makes a difference; how we engage with one another is also important. Fundamental to that is the politicking, which people either see or hear on the airwaves, when watching proceedings in the Chamber or when we are out and about in our constituencies.

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

Mrs Long: I suspect that the biggest disincentive comes when we are petty with one another and when we are seen to be immature in our engagement with one another.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs Long: Simply making people mark a piece of paper will not help to change that.

Mr Kinahan: I want to start by congratulating all the people who vote; they get involved and listen. I enjoyed listening to the debate, even though most Members expressed opposition to the main principle of the motion. Many Members focused too much on the word "compulsory". Encouraging a debate was part of what I wanted to do today, and a debate is exactly what has taken place. There are many things that we could do much better.

I would love there to be a vote on the motion. Some Members are watching and, I hope, listening to the debate through the screens in their rooms. I appeal to those who support me to get down here so that we can make a lot of noise at the appropriate time, which will be at the end of the debate.

Mr Shannon: The same goes for those who intend to vote against the motion.

Mr Kinahan: I thought that you might say that. I am really focusing on the fact that I think that there is an awful lot of lack of interest — that is appalling English from me. There is too much happening in society that allows people to switch off and not become involved. For all of us, the world is getting busier and busier and busier, and we do not have enough time. On voting day, some may be deterred by a fear of getting stuck in the snow or because they have to pick up their child. It has been made too easy not to vote, and that is what motivated my use of the word "compulsory".

One or two Members asked what punishment I would like to apply to non-voters. I do not wish there to be any punishment. I want some kind of carrot to be used to encourage people to vote. Members should concentrate on all the other matters that I raised, and many Members also raised them. The nature of voting is one of many matters that must change. As politicians, we must do better. The Electoral Commission must consider different ways of voting and get the debate up and running. That would allow us to decide how to persuade people to vote. Perhaps voting could run over two days or mobile and electronic voting could be introduced. There are so many different ways in which we could improve the system.

I return to an earlier point on which no Member picked up. Everywhere in Northern Ireland, including in companies and businesses, there is a culture of not being political. Politics has changed enormously to be where it is now, and I congratulate everyone involved in getting us this far, but we need people to discuss their views and become involved. I view compulsory voting as one of the necessary cogs in achieving that.

As I said earlier, I have met many people who simply say that they do not vote or are not interested in voting. Even some of the students at a marine lecture that I attended asked me how they could get their points across. Other than me, not one politician was there. I told the students that to get their points across they had to become involved. I told them to choose a party and join it. They looked at me in absolute horror. We must be better politicians and make it more attractive for people to become involved.

I also reiterate the point that we need all schools to become involved. They should not teach politics only to the politics students. They should teach all children about how politics works. Perhaps people would not then view it as onerous to be told that it was compulsory to go to the voting booth.

Some 500,000 people did not vote in the last Assembly election. The number of non-voters was more than two and a half times higher than the number who voted for the party that came first and more than 22.5 times higher than the number of voters for another party. I ask Members to think about that: an awful lot of people simply do not get to the polling booth for various reasons. That is why I said that we should go for compulsory voting. Let us open up the debate and keep it going.

Members raised various points. Mr Ross said that people should have the right to be uninterested in politics. I agree, but I want people to vote even if it is for "None of the above". It is too easy not to vote. In Northern Ireland, where voting is so important to making this place work and getting people involved, I would like to see people going to the polling stations. Once there, they can show their lack of interest, but at least they will have got there.

A debate was held in Europe on whether compulsory voting could be legal. It was decided that it would be legal as long as people were compelled only to go to the polling booth. People would not be forced to vote because they could spoil their voting slips.

Although Mr Doherty said that the introduction of compulsory voting would be premature, much of what he said was in support of debate as the way forward. I felt that same support in everything that all Members said. Every Member wants more people to vote and become involved.

Mr Dallat gave something of a political broadcast on certain matters, but I knew where he was coming from. I take his point that we must ensure that young people become involved so that they do not go down the terrorist route. I also take the Member's point that we must relate to people. It is the knocking on doors, meeting people on the ground, talking to them and being open that really creates an interest.

I like the idea of compulsory attendance in the Chamber. However, even in my new role here, I have realised that there are so many other things that we try to do. As long as we have it on television in our rooms, we are taking part. I did not like the slightly cheap shot that Mr Hamilton took in relation to our party not voting. We have hardly been included in the Executive; why should we vote if we are not included? I want things here to work much better. Every party should work together. If all of us have smiles on our faces and work together, the people watching and listening will start taking an interest and getting involved.

Mrs Long: The Member questioned why his party should vote when it has not been included fully in the Executive. Is that not contradictory to an argument that people outside who, equally, feel that politics is not responsive, should be compelled to vote?

Mr Kinahan: I did not quite follow the question. There are very much two sides to the issue. I want to see people being forced to vote. Forcing them may be the wrong thing to do, but we are focusing on the wrong issue. There is nothing wrong with encouraging people to do something that is slightly onerous — and it is just slightly onerous. We have to encourage them, engage with them and make the process interesting.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Dr W McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: I will lose my way completely, but by all means.

Mr Weir: A lot of us want to see people being encouraged, but compelling people to vote is where the problem lies. Mention was made earlier of how some people have disdain for this place. Simply having disdainful voters being compelled to vote would not remove the disdain. That is where we should target our attention.

Mr Kinahan: I agree. It is about how people are compelled. I want to go for the carrot system, but I go back to my point: we all have to work together on this issue.

Dr W McCrea: I thank the Member for giving way. He said that his colleagues did not vote because they are not participating fully in the Executive. However, the Members who are also Members at Westminster are not participants in the executive there, but they go to vote. They vote on the issues.

Mr Kinahan: I did not really want to get sucked into a petty argument about who votes and who does not. I see where the Member is coming from, but I will not get into the issue any more. I could go down other routes and talk of double-jobbing and other matters, but we could get into lots of things —

Dr W McCrea: Did Basil help you?

Mr Kinahan: Of course he helped me. He is a very good colleague.

I do not want to get buried in other matters. I wanted to get everybody debating the issue and thinking about new ways of moving forward. We have concentrated completely on the compulsion side of the argument, which is the wrong issue. As my colleague suggested, one has to do jury service. People have to wear seatbelts and smoke outside buildings. There are lots of things that many of us do not like, but that does not stop us from being forced to do them. I want to see us all making an effort to get this institution working much better. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and negatived.

Crisis in the Executive

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.

4.15 pm

Mr Lunn: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the large number of critical issues that the Executive have failed to resolve; expresses deep concern about the consequences for good governance, the economy and public services; and calls on the Executive to meet their responsibilities and to act in a collective manner for the good of Northern Ireland.

“Crisis in the Executive” is now a very well worn phrase that hardly raises an eyebrow any more. Even so, by any yardstick, the events of the past few days have raised that crisis to new heights. However, I do not intend to mention any aspect of those events, except to say that one of the critical issues to which the motion refers is the proposed transfer of policing and justice powers. That is an ongoing topic that is causing high drama in and around this place.

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

Speaking of this place, I am sure that when I and many others were elected for the first time in 2007, I was not the only one to arrive here, in the wake of the St Andrews Agreement, with hopes raised and the expectation that we were here to do business. We expected to be involved, either as part of the coalition Government or as a constructive opposition, in moving forward legislation to deal with necessary minor matters and to tackle the major issues that have plagued and divided this country for years, such as education, the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) shared future strategy, or the issues that have arisen more recently, such as the Maze stadium, the review of public administration (RPA) and policing and justice.

I do not intend to be too negative. Let us acknowledge that the Executive have managed to progress some legislation. Indeed, I recall recently that one of our Ministers, I believe that it was Peter Robinson, pointed out that the Executive had agreed more decisions in its first two years than the previous Ulster Unionist and SDLP coalition. Frankly, so what? We in Northern Ireland are fond of polls. I wonder what the population would come up with if it were asked to name the major achievement of the Assembly. The answer may be the fact that we are still here.

Outside of Budget decisions and entirely non-contentious matters, what has been achieved? I recently submitted a question for written answer requesting that OFMDFM provide an example of a

major issue on which the Executive had made progress. The answer came back:

"It is not our practice to disclose details of Executive business. The content of Executive papers and all aspects of Executive business are confidential."

I thought that the frost was on the ground for the past month.

My colleague Mr McCarthy has brought it to my notice that no Minister will respond to the debate. A junior Minister was here, but he has disappeared. I am disappointed with that, because I had hoped that a Minister would loosen up a wee bit and come up with something fresh that we do not know or tell us that some progress is being made.

I will look at the major issues that have been mentioned, starting with policing and justice. That power was removed from an Ulster Unionist-dominated government back in the 1970s and is now available to the Executive. The transfer of policing and justice is now being resisted by unionism and supported by nationalists, who, at the time, were delighted by its removal. Republicans who fought a war against the RUC now sit on the Policing Board. Things have moved on.

Unionist resistance is now founded on the dubious premise that there is not sufficient community confidence. That is another well worn phrase; perhaps somebody could define it. I challenge any unionist to do so in the debate and to identify how they decide how community confidence is not sufficient or when it will be.

As far as we are concerned, the same confidence that put the Assembly and the Executive together should be sufficient to sustain the transfer of those important powers. It is time to do the deal and for the Executive to take a collective decision. If that means a few defections to the extreme, so be it. We will never have mature democracy here without local control over justice and policing, irrespective of who is appointed the Minister responsible.

I will move on to the matter of the Maze stadium. At least Executive paralysis did not prevent a decision, even a patently wrong one. Instead of realising the dream of having a multi-sports, shared stadium as the anchor of the most significant development in Northern Ireland's history, we got a craven decision to dribble taxpayers' money into clapped-out separate stadiums and to investigate other, totally vague ways to utilise 350 acres of land gifted to the Executive.

We are told that cost was the reason for that, but I do not believe it. That decision was due, plainly and simply, to the Executive's failure to agree on the proposal for a conflict transformation centre. There is not much unionist confidence there.

What about the review of public administration? The future of that costly but necessary reform hangs by a thread. Will the Executive make a collective decision before time runs out? The clock is ticking. The Executive can move forward boldly, or they can procrastinate again and log in another costly failure.

I shall move on to education. "It's all about the children", but, plainly, it is not all about the children. It is about entrenched views, political dogma, elitism, socialism, inequality, 50,000 empty desks, four different systems, political control and a load of other factors, but the needs of children are way down the list.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that what has happened in education is an indictment of the Assembly's performance? I remember, as will other Members, that during the Assembly's first meeting, the former First Minister Ian Paisley said that our children are our best asset and that we must work to provide better things for them. What has happened since then completely contradicts those words.

Mr Lunn: I think that that was before my time, Mr Speaker. However, at some time, every party has parroted the phrase "It's all about the children", which, although she is fond of using it, is not under the exclusive control of the Minister of Education.

Is it really true that the Executive have not discussed education for two years? We do not get minutes or notes; indeed, the press gets more information than we do. The impression is that there has been a stand-off for two years due to the transfer impasse and due to concerns about the establishment of the education and skills authority. Is there a way that I am not aware of to end an impasse, or will the Executive collectively step up to the mark and meet their responsibilities?

I have tried not to shine a light on any particular party. The Executive are a collective body, and the failures that I have mentioned are the result of their corporate inability to make progress. As I said, we do not get minutes or notes from Thursday meetings, if, indeed, they actually take place. Sometimes, they appear not to happen. It would be easy to be more explicit, to rely on rumour and gossip or to make accusations about who is responsible. Therefore, the motion asks the Executive:

"to meet their responsibilities ... for the good of Northern Ireland."

Two and a half years is long enough to establish confidence and trust among Executive colleagues. We are being left behind by the electorate and, instead of refusing to talk, it is time for the Executive to lead. If they do not talk about the major issues at those meetings, what on earth do they talk about? I ask Members to support the motion.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Members should note the motion's reference to:

"the large number of critical issues that the Executive have failed to resolve".

That wording is unfortunate, because any objective and honest assessment must acknowledge that, on a day-to-day basis, the Executive are functioning and, on an ongoing basis, Ministers and Departments are addressing issues and delivering effective governance. There are issues that have defied resolution, but the motion is presented in such a way that, in effect, it plays to the agenda of those in the media who undermine public confidence in politics. "The fools on the hill" is a constant refrain, and we have all the pejorative rhetoric that we read in the press.

We know about the attitude of dissident elements — unionist and republican — in our society and about their ambitions for this place. I do not include the Alliance Party as one of those elements, but there are some Members with a similar attitude; they do not accept the Assembly's basic principles and they do not want it to work.

Although it is self-evident, given the agenda that I have described, it appears that it is necessary for Members to say more often than we do that the vast majority of issues that present themselves to the Executive are addressed and delivered on. There are issues — more than I am comfortable with — that, so far, have defied us.

However, we need to acknowledge that many problems have been solved, considering that we have come from a society that was riven with conflict, division, murder and mayhem right across the region. Some of those problems were described by others as intractable, and some claimed that it was impossible to find a resolution to them. We have not solved all our problems, but I recognise, indeed wholeheartedly acknowledge, that the Alliance Party wants the system to work.

The motion is deficient for the reasons that I have described, and I am disappointed that it was presented in such a way. I would have had no difficulty if it had focused on the issues that remain and how the Assembly can deal with them. I am convinced that those issues, with an acceptance of the principles of power sharing and equality, will provide solutions to all those problems. However, some issues will take longer than others to resolve, and some have been built up into problems. Indeed, we must reflect on some of the issues that we have addressed in the process that brought us here over the past decade and a half and ask why we made it so difficult for ourselves. We should unlearn the tendency to build barricades and then have to climb over them. It is something that all shades of political opinion have

become good at. A tendency to look for solutions rather than problems would be a big help.

People talk about the mandatory four-party coalition when it is no such thing; it is entirely a voluntary decision for a party to offer itself for an Executive position. A party can refuse to accept such a position. However, it cannot accept an Executive position and then argue that it is in some way semi-detached; or accept a position while rejecting power sharing and maintaining that it had no option under law but to accept an Executive position. That is wrong; it did have an option.

The message from the mandates that parties received when they came here is that the public wants this place to work in a more cohesive fashion than we have achieved up to now. However, despite the obvious problems and crisis, which is a good word, when dealing with the circumstances in which we find ourselves, we should reflect on the problems that have been solved to enable us to reach this point. That would reinforce the view that even those problems that are challenging us today can and will be resolved.

I ask the movers of the motion to consider carefully whether they want to divide the House at this time.

Mr B McCrea: My speech is critical of the Alliance Party. I intend to keep it on the table while I engage in politics and have a discussion. There are a number of points that I wish to raise. Mr Lunn outlined many issues, such as not getting information from the Executive and not getting any participation, but those are the points that our party has been making for some time. I want to say in non-confrontational terms that the position that the Alliance Party has adopted is strange on a number of areas.

It is not for me to tell the Alliance Party what its policy is, but, as a colleague, I had certain expectations about how the party of what used to be called "the centre ground" might try to work together and play a stabilising role. A good question was asked about what we have achieved in this place; the answer was that very little had been achieved. In fact, the answer came back from Mr Maginness, sotto voce, that we are still here. However, if you asked the people of Northern Ireland, I am not sure whether they would consider that an achievement. It may be that the relative absence of violence is an achievement and that we have an opportunity to move forward. I am not sure that people believe that the Assembly's contribution aids that.

4.30 pm

I listened with interest to Mr McLaughlin from Sinn Féin. Although this is difficult to say, I have said it before. I cannot say it behind closed doors, because no one talks to us, and, therefore, I must say it in the open. When people look for reciprocation, when they talk about respect or when they misunderstand a

position, it is incumbent on other people to try to explain where there is an issue and where problems lie. Therefore, I acknowledge Mr McLaughlin's point. In fact, I have made the same argument: if the Assembly does not stand up collectively to slay the lies about fools on the hill and does not speak up for itself, who will speak up for it? The Assembly has achievements and has made progress. However, the central issue appears to be lost. Unless everybody agrees and all views are taken on board, nothing will work or be sustainable.

The point has been made about policing and justice, which is germane to the debate, that two parties are expected to have a discussion and then come back and tell others what they must do. In that situation, the Alliance Party's Mr Ford, the self-appointed leader of the opposition — for years, he told the Assembly that he did not support the Programme for Government, the sectarian nature of politics here, the way in which the Assembly does business and so on — now does his level best to become the next Minister for justice. He has voted with the DUP and Sinn Féin on double-jobbing and all sorts of other issues, which, frankly, I find surprising.

The issue of consistency has been raised. It has been asked whether Members genuinely want the Assembly to work. I make no bones about it when I say that I believe in devolution. I believe in this place and in the bona fides of all Members, who come from different traditions and hold different points of view yet try to do the best that they can for all Northern Ireland's people. I believe in that, which is why I find it irritating and disrespectful for people to say that the Ulster Unionist Party is sectarian. My party is not sectarian. To suggest otherwise is derogatory.

Therefore, on the issue that is being debated, I take the opportunity to say to Members from the Alliance Party that Members to their left and to their right in the Chamber are trying to find a constructive way forward. It would be better for them to work with us rather than to take cheap political opportunities that they believe may give them electoral advantage at some stage.

Mrs Long: When Mr McCrea says that the Alliance Party should "work with us", does he mean all the Executive parties or just the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party?

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for the extra minute that has been added to my time. When I say "us", I mean those of us who are here. In fact, "us" is fairly weak. The Member's colleague Mr Lunn usually pulls me up to ask who exactly is "we" and who is "us". I refer to all Members who want this place to move forward constructively. I assure the Member that the Ulster Unionist Party will respond constructively when it is given the opportunity to do so. Where we

have difficulties, they are genuine. The Member may not agree with them or even understand them. Only through dialogue can progress be made.

I will finish by saying that my party will support the motion, because it does not believe that the Executive are working properly. The Ulster Unionist Party wants to find a better way to move forward.

Mr O'Loan: It would certainly be easy to score many political points in the debate and to point to failures. Although it might be valid to do so, it would not be particularly useful. Would it make the situation any better?

Duncan Morrow, the chief executive of the Community Relations Council, remarked to me once that everybody in Northern Ireland basically agrees on what the problem is: it is "them". Although we may think that we are broad-minded, we all carry that baggage to some extent.

Recently, Breda O'Brien, a columnist for 'The Irish Times', wrote about her involvement in a broadcast debate on abortion. She deeply opposed the views of another person who took part in the debate. They contradicted each other seriously during the programme. Afterwards, when they were discussing the role of the family in modern society and the issues facing young people, they found that they agreed on a lot of points. Subsequent to that, she made a new year's resolution to try to understand better those who, on the face of it, disagreed with her. I think that we can learn something from that.

It is clear that the Assembly has lost track and that people think that it has not delivered on their behalf. We know that from talking to people, and opinion polls have tested that well. I will mention a few areas of obvious weakness. I do not mean to do so in any spirit of recrimination but in the hope that we will learn some lessons and, in the end, find ways of going forward in a better way.

In education, the failure to deliver a transfer system is an item that, on its own, would have brought down anything that we would call a normal government. It also looks as though we might be coming to a solution on justice and policing because it serves a narrow political interest to do so, and there is a potential fear that the actual design might be put there because it serves a narrow political interest. With regard to the economy, there is no sense of getting off the ground. There is a constant atmosphere of cuts and crisis in relation to our Budget. Therefore we have a problem, and it is a big one.

The Good Friday Agreement states:

"we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all."

We are committed to partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between these islands.”

The Agreement also states that all the institutional and constitutional arrangements are interlocking and interdependent. That is aspirational and practical. There is a visionary element to it, but there is also a complex system of checks, balances and protections, and that system of checks and balances can be used to achieve the vision. Is that what we see in the working-out of our government? I think that it is not. I think that much has been lost. We lost a lot of the letter of the Good Friday Agreement at St Andrews, and then, later and, perhaps, before, we lost much of the spirit. Have we that sense of partnership in the Executive? I do not think that the public are seeing that.

There are a great deal of back-room deals going on between the two largest parties. Back-room deals are not wrong in themselves, but there are things wrong about them. First, for the most part, it is the largest parties who are involved in those back-room deals, and there is little consideration for other parties in the Executive and for the wider Assembly. Secondly, the deals are very much based on, “One for you, and one for me”. An attempt is being made before our eyes to create what has been described as a shared-out society, not a truly shared society. Is that working? The consequence that we can see before our eyes is that it is not working. There is no coherent strategy, and we end up lurching from crisis to crisis. One might ask whether there is an alternative, and there is. Just as the upcoming financial crisis could be used to our betterment, we could do some valuable rethinking, or, to put it better, we may be forced to do some valuable rethinking from which we may benefit. That is true also in relation to our governance.

I ask that Members be humble enough to learn from the failures of the past three years. There is a fundamental question being asked about where the Assembly is placed and how it may move forward. I ask that we go back and put in place the totality of the Good Friday Agreement in its letter and in its spirit.

Mr Hamilton: I am intrigued that we are debating a motion headed “Crisis in the Executive”, because, on 4 January, David Ford, the leader of the Alliance Party, issued a statement saying that the week beginning on that day was the last week in which a crisis in Stormont could be averted. However, at the same time, a motion headed “Crisis in the Executive” had been tabled. It was clear that Mr Ford saw that there was no chance of averting a crisis, and the Alliance Party had already pronounced on that one.

It would be churlish not to accept that there are major issues outstanding that are important to people and their lives and on which Executive agreement is required. Education is, perhaps, the most topical of the

outstanding issues and the most important for many people. Other outstanding issues include the CSI strategy, RPA and policing and justice. Nobody can stand here and deny that aspects of those issues are not agreed; some may be disagreed on in their entirety. However, to dwell on that negativity, as some Members would like to, does us all a disservice, and it overlooks the fundamental point that we have a difficult form of government here. There are systemic issues, including the fact that we have a mandatory rather than a voluntary coalition and the fact that there is historical suspicion — indeed, enmity — on all sides.

Aside from the differences that we have across the Chamber on the constitutional question, there are often diametrically opposed political positions. Some of us are centre-right, some are centre-left, and some are somewhere in between and do not know where they are. There are different views, and we all bring different perspectives on bread-and-butter policy issues, never mind constitutional issues.

Given that all those factors were and are in place, is it any wonder that there are outstanding issues? In having issues on which we cannot agree, are we any worse than other Governments — even single-party Governments, never mind coalition Governments — around the world that have difficulties in agreeing common positions on crucial issues? That happens in countries that do not have the distrust dating back decades that we have. There are still difficulties in delivering any response, never mind a quick response, to difficult issues.

However, in spite of all our intrinsic problems, which I hope nobody will deny that we face and that we must overcome in the longer term, can it really be argued that we have not achieved much? There has been no suspension of the Assembly and the Executive, at least to this point, which stands in stark contrast with the previous, post-Belfast Agreement attempt at government, when the Executive was up and down with seemingly weekly if not monthly regularity.

Whether or not they still agree with it, all parties in the Executive agreed a Budget, as they did a Programme for Government and an investment strategy. Those are fundamental documents of great importance that were agreed by all sides at the time. In September 2009, the First Minister told us the number of agreements that have been made at Executive level. He contrasted the current Executive with the 31 months of the UUP/SDLP-led Executive in the early part of the past decade. Under that previous Executive, 320 agreements were made, yet in a shorter time — 29 months — the current Executive have had agreement on 451 issues.

In spite of those fundamental agreements, Mr Lunn asks what we have achieved. He is fuelling the fire for the argument that we have achieved nothing. He may

not be proud of what we have done in the Assembly since 2007, but I am. I can think of a long list of achievements: record levels of investment in our infrastructure; the introduction of a small business rates relief; a cap on industrial rates; a freezing of the domestic rate; and the lone pensioner allowance, which has reaped over £2 million for some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Those are initiatives that my party has helped to introduce, as have other parties in the Chamber. One of the Sinn Féin Ministers introduced free public transport for people over 60 years of age. As she reminded us earlier today, the SDLP's Minister secured what was, for the last decade, a record number of newbuild houses for social housing. The UUP Benches have introduced free prescription charges. Every party has made a consistent effort to do something, and we should be proud of that.

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

Mr Hamilton: If we want quick and good responses, reform of the system is needed. My party has been consistent in outlining how that can be achieved. We have achieved much, and there is certainly much more to do.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Hamilton: However, beating ourselves up in the way that Mr Lunn wants will only fuel the fire for those who want to criticise the institution and knock it down. I am very proud of what we have.

Mr Elliott: We in the Assembly and the Executive deal with issues that affect people's real lives. One example of that is education, which has been mentioned. I feel so frustrated, because I hear the frustration of some of my constituents every week when they tell me that they have been unable to increase the size of their factories or to build homes for their neighbours, sons or daughters on their own land because of planning difficulties. The fact that those day-to-day practical issues are tied up and bogged down in the Assembly means that progress cannot be made.

4.45 pm

I am aware that the bigger issues such as the devolution of policing and justice powers are being looked at at the moment — or at least some people are looking at it. The Ulster Unionist Party will not accept being handed a piece of paper and being told what it is expected to sign up to on policing and justice if it has had no direct input into the process. I wish that the other parties in the Executive, particularly the two larger parties, would accept and realise that and bring us and the other parties to the negotiating table.

We must be realistic enough to know that any Executive or Government will have difficulties in their

administration and in making decisions. It is even more difficult with the type of system that we have here in the Executive. On top of that, it seems much more difficult for this particular Executive because the two larger parties appear to want to carve up the issues between them, isolate the rest of us and hope and assume that we will fall in behind them and do as they say. That cannot continue, and it is one of the reasons why we keep getting into this position. Mr Hamilton has said that we should be grateful that the Assembly has not been suspended, yet for five months the Executive did not make any decisions and practically nothing happened. It might as well have been suspended, because no progress was made.

I would like to see a more co-operative approach taken where possible. It may not always be possible, and, as a Member mentioned earlier, some issues need to be discussed and resolved between one or two parties. I am quite happy with that. However, in broader terms there must be more co-operation and better relationships, even though it is sometimes evident that there is not a good relationship between the two main parties when we see how they react to each other in the Chamber.

It is difficult to accept that the Alliance Party has tabled this motion, when at the same time it wants to place more difficulties before the Executive by devolving policing and justice powers at this time. We cannot resolve some of the simple issues, yet that party wants to have an input into an even more controversial issue. However, I suppose that that is no real surprise coming from that party, as it sees a personal opportunity.

Dr Farry: I am not going to rise to the bait regarding the alleged self-interest of the Alliance Party. What I will point out to the Member — perhaps he will respond on it — is the difference between our two approaches. We agree that there are problems with the Executive, but, while his party argues that nothing further can be devolved to a messy Executive, the Alliance Party argues that we must devolve further. The argument surrounding policing and justice is poisoning the atmosphere in the Executive and threatening the stability of the institutions. Devolution is part of resolving the crisis; it is not a further threat but a part of the solution.

Mr Elliott: I would be interested to see the Member's evidence of how the other issues will be resolved if policing and justice powers are devolved. I have no evidence as to how that will happen, but I am happy to give way to him again if he wants to produce that evidence or tell me how it will be done. Perhaps he has a secret mission from the Alliance Party; the first such mission that that party has had.

Dr Farry: The very early win will be in keeping all the parties around the Executive table; no one walks

away, and the institutions stay in place. Devolution is certainly necessary. It is not sufficient, but it is stage one of the process of bringing stability and better governance to Northern Ireland.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for his intervention, but still he has given no indication of how the Alliance Party will resolve the problems of education, planning and council reorganisation. Those are all sticking points in the Executive, as are many more issues, yet I have heard no indication of how they will be fixed. The motion comes from those who have been champions of opposition in the Northern Ireland Assembly for years, and, all of a sudden —

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

Mr Elliott: All of a sudden, we want to see them jump into bed with the Executive that they have criticised for so long.

Mr A Maginness: It is self-evident that we have been in crisis management from the beginning of this Administration; indeed, the previous Administration were in crisis management as well. Since I was elected to the Assembly in 1998, we have lived under the cloud of crisis management. That is a plain political fact.

The problem, as my party and I see it, is the failure to build partnership. We have to build partnership in the Assembly and throughout the institutions. In order to achieve the goal of reconciliation as outlined in the Good Friday Agreement, we must use partnership. We must build a partnership between nationalist and unionist, Catholic and Protestant, in this institution and in other institutions, and between North and South. The failure of some parties to realise or to buy into the importance of partnership is the central reason that we live under the cloud of crisis management. I believe that we can get out from under it and move forward. An opportunity presents itself to do that, given the fact that justice and policing powers will, in all probability, be transferred in the near future or, at least, that the issue will be resolved. If that issue is resolved, it will create a situation in which stability can be achieved in the Executive, and we can then address the other issues, among them education and RPA.

We should create good will among our people and among the parties in the Assembly. If we do that, we can overcome all our problems, because the lack of good will is the toxin in the system. Partnership is not simply attending the Executive or all parties being proportionately represented on that Executive or on Committees of the House. It is more than that. It is tolerance and respect for one another's point of view, the creation of good will among people and forgiveness of one another's faults, wrongs and hurts in the past.

I encourage Members to create that spirit of partnership, because that is the only way forward for all of us as a community. We owe it to the people who have elected us to heal the wounds in the community and to unite it. If we do that, we will create a new politics, a politics of reconciliation. However, we cannot achieve reconciliation unless we have genuine, sustained partnership.

At present, the two major parties are far apart and seem, in some respects, estranged from the idea of partnership. I hope that, given a new situation, they can renew that concept of partnership. The temporary change in leadership, with the new Acting First Minister, may be a step towards the widening of vision in the DUP. There could be a much wider embrace by the DUP of the principles and spirit of partnership, and I welcome the change in leadership — albeit that it may be temporary — in the Office of the First Minister. That has been an important contribution to the creation of a new atmosphere here.

If policing and justice powers, which give responsibility for law and order here, were transferred, the Assembly would have increased powers and increased responsibilities through which we would all share in the rule of law and the rule of justice here. That would provide a great opportunity for us to come together and fulfil the hopes of partnership. I hope that we can move from crisis management to a real, self-sustaining partnership that will transform political relationships in the House and in society.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr A Maginness: I hope that we will achieve the objective of the Good Friday Agreement, which is reconciliation.

Dr W McCrea: I have listened to a lot of doublespeak in the debate. Much of the debate's content has verged on a hypocritical analysis of the situation, and everyone has blamed anyone but themselves.

I agree with Mr Elliott that a more cohesive and joined-up approach must be taken. Democrats would certainly welcome that, and such an approach is important. I do not expect Mr Elliott or his colleagues simply to accept anything as a *fait accompli*, whether it is the devolution of justice and policing or anything else. The Ulster Unionist Party has a vital role to play on that issue, and it has a view to express. It is important that, rather than being on the sidelines of the debate, it is at the heart of it and of the decision-making process.

We are under a cloud in that the Assembly is based, in my opinion, on the unacceptable position of enforced partnership. This is not a normal partnership that the parties decide whether or not they desire. It is an enforced partnership, and we are told —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Dr W McCrea: With the greatest respect, the Member has had his moment in the sun, and we will now carry on with the debate.

There are those who not only have been politically opposed to unionism but have been involved in terrorism for many years, and yet we are told that, if we want to have a government in Northern Ireland, those people must be in the top positions in government. That would not be tolerated in any democratic society. That, therefore, is a cloud that we are labouring under.

As I have said before in the Chamber, major issues other than the devolution of policing and justice need to be dealt with. I agree with Mr Elliott that education is one of those issues. We have a Minister who is so pig-headed that she will not move from a certain position, which puts the education of all children in a state of confusion. That situation is totally unacceptable, and it needs to be dealt with. We have power to deal with the issue of housing and of whether people have a job in a recession, and people are saying that the Assembly should show that it can deal with those issues before it asks for extra powers.

People suggest that, if we can pull a magical solution for the devolution of policing and justice out of the hat, everything will be sunshine and light. We have problems to deal with, and my constituents are demanding that we deal with housing and the potholes in the roads across Northern Ireland. As representatives of the people of the Province, we have a bounden duty to deal with bread and butter issues. Somehow, we have got away from that, but dealing with those issues is the bedrock of a good society. The House must care about people who are sick and dying and about roads, housing and whether a person has a job, instead of always looking for more and more responsibility.

With responsibility comes accountability. We, therefore, have to deal with that that situation.

5.00 pm

It is not good enough for the SDLP to try to pretend that it can sit in an Executive and agree a Budget and then have the very Minister who agreed that Budget come into this House and try to blame all the other Executive members for what is going wrong. That is the height of irresponsibility, and it does not give the community any confidence.

Society is demanding real action on real issues. Many are just simple bread and butter issues that need to be dealt with. This House needs to deal with them; it has the responsibility to deal with them. Let it get on with the job of doing so.

Dr Farry: Members may be interested to know that today is Martin Luther King Jnr Day in the United States. He famously said:

“True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.”

In our context, peace has to be seen as more than simply the absence of violence; it has to be the presence of a proper, reconciled society in Northern Ireland. We are far from that.

However, even turning that quote to look at devolution and the performance of this Assembly, we have to think of devolution as being more than simply about stability, or some form of pseudo-stability, or about simply achieving the maintenance of representatives from different sections of our society in government. Devolution, if it is to mean anything, has to be about delivering real change for the people of Northern Ireland: changing their lives, changing the economy, sustaining public services and building a shared future.

The Alliance Party is a critical friend of the Executive. It certainly welcomes the progress and the real change that has happened in Northern Ireland over recent years. Indeed, it wishes the parties that form the Executive well in their deliberations, and it wishes the process well over the next critical days as we try to find increased stability in our system.

I acknowledge that there have been positive achievements on the part of the Executive, particularly the way in which they managed aspects of their Budget with regard to investment, as Simon Hamilton mentioned. Equally, however, we have to acknowledge that there have been, and still are, major flaws in the institutional design that do not lend themselves to good governance. We do not have a system that lends itself to easy compromise. Parties are not encouraged to compromise in government and are not penalised for failing to do so. We have also failed to make key decisions in a number of areas, and, I presume, failed to seize opportunities that have come along for Northern Ireland. Had we been better organised, we might have been in a better position to seize such opportunities.

Comments were made about the Alliance Party position. It is ambitious to enter government. What party in the world is not? It would be foolish not to.

Mr B McCrea: If the Member or one of his party were to become Minister for Justice, who, then, would provide the opposition? Furthermore, does he feel that this democratic institution requires an opposition?

Dr Farry: I am tempted to say, as Ronald Reagan said: “There he goes again”, back on the issue of personalities. The issue of justice is about the delivery of devolution and the delivery of policy change on justice for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr B McCrea: Are you going to answer the question?

Dr Farry: Will you give me a chance? The Alliance Party's approach is not about self interest or bums on seats. It is about having confidence in our values and beliefs; it is about having the right policies and the desire to change things. If we go into government, we will not be abandoning any of our ideals or plans for change in this society, or, indeed, our freedom of manoeuvre.

On the point that Mr McCrea raised, and I can see that he is getting rather restless, we are, at the moment, playing a role of opposition. This system does not lend itself well to that of government and opposition. There are not the resources for a properly funded opposition.

In most societies around the world, parties move in and out of government and opposition. That is the norm; that is healthy. Our party looks forward to a day when we have a voluntary coalition that is, potentially, open to all parties, including Sinn Féin, and where parties are sometimes in opposition. That is what is healthy, but it is not what we have under the current rules. We must see how we can best achieve our objectives within the context of those rules.

Simon Hamilton spoke much about the achievements of the Executive. There have certainly been many financial initiatives, and no doubt they have been very popular in some quarters of Northern Ireland and have helped people. However, they have come at a cost. First, we have missed the opportunity to rebalance our economy; all we have done is cut the costs for people as things stand, but we have still the same underlying structural deficiencies in society. Nothing has changed. We have also had major opportunity costs with respect to the funding of public services. That debate will take place more and more frequently over coming weeks, particularly in the light of the announcement that was made last week by the Finance Minister. We will potentially preside over major cuts in public services, and the people of Northern Ireland will respond to that.

We must also be clear. There are a number of particular areas where we have major crises. It is a disgrace that the Assembly has contributed to a situation in which even basic timetables cannot be met. The education and skills authority was supposed to be operational by 1 January 2010. That was a major reform in education and it was announced well in advance. The Committee finally produced its own report, but the Executive have stalled over it and we have missed the boat in respect of legislation to meet that timetable. We have not been able to implement a replacement for A Shared Future. I accept that parties may have wished to do that, but they have not taken that opportunity. The most critical issue facing Northern Ireland is its divisions and we have no new policy to meet them. Unbelievably, after a seven-year review of public administration, we are potentially

about to mess it up and return, in consequence, to what we had before.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Dr Farry: Those types of crises are letting down the people of Northern Ireland.

Ms Purvis: Collective responsibility is a good thing, and it means that whatever gets through the Executive will definitely stick, because it will have gained the support of a number of the political parties — and, soon, that will include most of the political parties in the Chamber, which ideally represents most of our community.

The problem is getting policy and legislation through that process. Instead of proposals having “stickability” once they have made it through the Executive, they have “stuckability” before they even reach the Executive, because they must first pass a DUP filter and then a Sinn Féin filter. It seems that the proposals just cannot make it out of the Executive meeting room.

The crisis to which this motion refers is not just limited to the Executive; rather, it affects all the devolved institutions that are meant to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. We are responsible for that. As political parties, in recent years we have focused largely on ourselves, and we continue to do so. We look at the institutions and the policies that they produce, or do not produce, through the lens of elections. We ask ourselves what will this do for my party. Where is the cut-off point? At what point do we start to look at issues and make decisions based solely on what is best for Northern Ireland, for the people who live here and the future that we are all forced to endure together?

Having collective responsibility means that there must be a shared vision for this country that the Executive want to realise. However, there is no shared vision for this country. The Programme for Government does not count. It is now fantasy stuff. It always was, but the recession has exposed the massive flaws in that plan to borrow, buy and build our way out of the future.

What the members of the Executive need to do now, in order to get collective responsibility, is to produce a genuine and collective vision for Northern Ireland based on the question about what type of society we want to live in. When we know where we are supposed to be going, it will be easier to agree on how we get there.

I support the motion.

Mrs Long: As we had hoped, the tone of this afternoon's debate has been reasonably constructive, with the sad exception of Tom Elliott's contribution, which was not particularly constructive. Most of the

debate has been carried out in the spirit in which the motion was proposed. The motion was not meant to be an attack on the Executive; it was meant to be an opportunity for an open and honest assessment of the problems that face the Executive. My party believes that those problems go wider than the issue of policing and justice, but, as we said during the debate, that is clearly a key part of the jigsaw in resolving the overall problems.

The motion is also a constructive call for more collectivity in the Executive. We veered away from criticising individual parties or groups of parties for lack of delivery. However, I must accept the point that the structures here do not necessarily facilitate good delivery and the operation of good governance. Therefore, the structures themselves are barriers that must be overcome in order for the Executive to deliver.

The institutions were designed to sustain the peace process and wider inclusion, rather than to provide for the efficient delivery of effective government. I know that Trevor Lunn's remarks that the survival of the institutions is our biggest achievement were made tongue in cheek. However, the coalition of the diverse parties that are involved in the Government is an achievement that should not be sniffed at. The fact that we are still here today, particularly given where we have been over the past two months, is an important achievement because the peace and stability that we have enjoyed since 1998 is largely due to the fact there has been a political process and a functioning Assembly for most of that time. It would, therefore, be wrong to underestimate the impact that the destruction of the institutions would have on the stability and peace that people enjoy in our communities.

The institutions are politically unstable because of the mix of parties and ideologies. However, instability also comes from people's perception that the institutions — this is what we really want to talk about — have not delivered to the degree to which people had hoped. Mitchel McLaughlin talked about what the Executive have delivered, and I agree that — this point has been reflected in a number of the contributions — Ministers in the Executive have delivered exceptionally well, in their silos. However, we did not say that there is a crisis in the Departments; we said that there is a crisis in the Executive. Difficulties have arisen when matters have had to come to the Executive for agreement, because that requires ministerial co-operation. That process has been particularly difficult when contentious issues are involved or when people use one contentious issue to gain leverage over another. Unfortunately, that has been the pattern of government: people have wanted to stow away issues that they can then trade on in order to ease the process. That is not good for government, but it is the reality of how the Executive have functioned.

I understand Mr McLaughlin's concern that the motion may fuel lack of confidence. However, that is not our intention, and I am glad that he reflected that. We have been very measured in the contributions that we have made. Those of us who are not members of the Executive are using the only Chamber available to us to reflect our concern about the community's lack of confidence in the Executive's ability to deliver, and to talk about building the confidence that everybody is seeking.

Basil McCrea said that he was surprised at how the Alliance Party has voted on a number of issues. There is no need for him to be surprised, because my party's voting patterns are due to the consistent application of policy and principles. That is also consistent with the remarks that David Ford made at the outset of the Assembly mandate. He said that we would provide a coherent and constructive opposition, and that the challenge for the Executive was to be as coherent and constructive. It is entirely appropriate that, on occasion, we have not set out to simply oppose the DUP and Sinn Féin. There will be occasions when we agree with both of them and other occasions when we do not agree with either. That is not an unusual set of circumstances. We will look at each individual item on its merits.

I will repeat our position on the issue of policing and justice for certain Members' benefit, but I know that they will not accept it. That perhaps answers Basil McCrea's question as to why we cannot work better with his party: it simply will not accept an honest assessment. We are working hard to see policing and justice delivered. We want to ensure that it is devolved quickly, that it is properly structured, that it is focused on the issues that matter to the people of Northern Ireland, and that it will be able to deliver on those issues.

In all that, the least of our concerns —

5.15 pm

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Long: No, I will not give way.

In all that, the least of our concerns is about the personalities, and I, and others, have said that before. Unfortunately, however, some Members are seeking to make party political capital out of that. That being the case, there is not much that I can say to convince them otherwise. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order. I ask Members on both sides of the House who are having private conversations to move outside. It is important that the Member who is speaking be heard.

Mrs Long: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

If we cannot convince people of that, that is fine. However, to refer back to the previous debate, party politicking is one reason for the electorate's cynicism about the political system.

Declan O'Loan talked about the spirit of agreement and inclusion that accompanied the Good Friday Agreement and how he feels that that has been lost. I think that he is right. There has been a breakdown in trust, not just within the Executive but, more generally, between parties in the political institutions. The inability to deliver on key issues such as cohesion, sharing and integration strategies also creates the perception that resolving issues around confidence and trust is not high enough up the agenda.

Simon Hamilton talked about systemic issues, and I do not disagree with him when it comes to how the system is structured. However, the motion tries to reflect the measured discussion we are having around the concerns that we have.

The issue is not whether the Executive have achieved anything; rather, it is whether people outside perceive that they have. I suspect that there is a disconnect between the two, and that is what the motion is really about. Major issues, such as education and the RPA, are stuck in the system. The delivery of those big-ticket items would create a lot more confidence than perhaps the delivery of worthwhile, but much smaller, issues would.

Tom Elliott talked about the issues around isolation and carve-ups, and expressed frustration that his party was being ignored in much of the process. I admit to being confused by the position that the Ulster Unionist Party has taken on policing and justice. Today, Tom said that the UUP was not in favour of early devolution, and yet, at other times, we have been told that, if the conditions were right, it could happen as soon as is necessary and that it was something that the party was in favour of. I do not understand that position.

I reiterate the point that Stephen made —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Long: No, I will not give way.

I reiterate the point that Stephen made in relation to the Executive. In areas where devolution is complete, a barrier in the Executive has been removed around trust and confidence in their ability to continue. If we are to resolve the currently unresolved issues, the Executive need to continue, and the lack of progress on policing and justice is one way of stopping that. That is the logic behind our argument. By devolving policing and justice, we would get one hurdle out of the way and one political crisis removed from the system, and we could start to deal with other issues. That is hugely important.

The tone of some of the Ulster Unionist Party's interventions has answered the question as to why we, as centre parties, cannot work together. The constant party politicking, which today has come only from their Benches, does not make it easier for any of us to find levels of co-operation.

Alban Maginness talked about the institutions being involved in crisis management and about the lack of goodwill being a toxin in the system. I agree with that. The lack of trust, confidence and goodwill is hugely important, and it is important that we try to build respect for each other's points of view and try to move forward.

In conclusion, there are challenges for all parties in the House. We brought forward a motion focusing on issues around the Executive because we are deeply concerned about the future and reputation of the political institutions. I believe that those institutions are a vital part of the peace process and that we are all beneficiaries of that process. However, the institutions must be more than simply a vehicle for the peace process. They have to be a vehicle for good governance, and that requires perhaps more give and take than anything else.

As the largest parties in the coalition, the DUP and Sinn Féin have special responsibilities around delivery and inclusion. That is something that they acknowledge, and they have done so in the Chamber. As significant partners in the Government, the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists also have responsibilities. In the call for inclusion, that inclusion has to be on the basis that people are seeking to be willing partners rather than simply seeking out ammunition that can be used against others in a future election. To build confidence and trust, that has to be seen publicly as well as expressed privately.

I refer back to the previous debate around how to motivate the electorate. We motivate the electorate least when we are cynical.

The Alliance Party, the PUP, the Green Party and others are here to hold the Executive to account and to challenge them. That is the position in which the electorate has put us. We do that not to destabilise the Executive but to challenge them towards improved performance. On that basis, we do not put the motion forward for a vote.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Can we have some clarity on what is once again a confusing decision on the part of the Alliance Party? Surely the motion was put after the Clerk read it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I hope that I am right, because I agree with the Member. Therefore, I will put the motion to a vote.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It has been clearly established in the Assembly and in other legislatures that, at the final point of a winding-up speech, a Member may choose to press or to not press the motion to a division. I see that a constituency colleague of mine who also represents South Antrim in another place is nodding with me. Perhaps you will reconsider the ruling that you just made.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It would have been very kind if I had been given some notice of the decision to not put the motion to a vote. Had that been the case, I could have sought the necessary information. I ask the Assembly to take its ease while I check whether the Member is correct. I repeat that it would have been nice to have been told.

If there are no objections, the motion can be withdrawn.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I object to the motion's being withdrawn. We have spent considerable time and energy discussing it, so surely we can have a vote on it. It is up to Alliance Party Members if they do not want to vote for their own motion; however, we have indicated that we want to vote in favour of it.

Mr S Wilson: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, I know that the Member likes to think that he has influence in his own party, but it now appears that he wants to have influence over other parties. Surely it is up to the Members in whose names the motion was tabled to decide whether they wish to push it to a vote. If they do not, it is not for other parties to insist that they do.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that I can solve the problem, but I would have been able to do so earlier had I been told what was happening. If there is an objection, the Question must be put.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not think that I should take any more points of order on the matter, but I will allow some latitude on this occasion.

Mr Ford: I can remember that on previous occasions in the House there were clear differences of opinion between those who wanted to support a motion and the proposer of that motion, who chose not to put it to a vote at the final stage of their winding-up speech. I notice that, in addition to the MP for South Antrim, the MP for East Antrim is now nodding with me. Both those Members have some understanding of parliamentary procedures. It is in the gift of those in whose names a private Members' motion is tabled as to whether they press it to a vote; it is not a matter for other Members.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It does not matter how many people are nodding in agreement with the Member, the

procedure is very clear. Mr Basil McCrea has objected, and I, as Deputy Speaker, must put the Question. I would be grateful if I were allowed to do that now.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 29; Noes 17.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Cobain, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McFarland, Mr McGlone, Mr Neeson, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Farry and Ms Lo.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Billy Leonard, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr F McCann and Mr McLaughlin.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Craig, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Miss McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr S Wilson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members will resume their seats, and I suggest that they put their mobile phones away as well.

We have a little technical hitch here. *[Laughter.]*

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the large number of critical issues that the Executive has failed to resolve; expresses deep concern about the consequences for good governance, the economy and public services; and calls on the Executive to meet their responsibilities and to act in a collective manner for the good of Northern Ireland.

Adjourned at 5.37 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 19 January 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday afternoon in the Chamber, the House discussed an Alliance Party motion for an hour and a half. At the end of the debate, Mrs Long decided not to put the motion to the House. There was quite a bit of discussion on what was the appropriate decision and whether the Deputy Speaker made the correct decision. Will you clarify whether he made the correct decision?

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that point of order. Although I was not in the Chair, I watched the proceedings closely, and the Deputy Speaker acted in the appropriate manner — totally and absolutely.

Mr B McCrea: Further to that point of order: during the deliberations, Mr Ford and others appeared to challenge the ruling of the Deputy Speaker on two occasions. Now that the position has been clarified, what is the appropriate response, and has Mr Ford apologised to the Deputy Speaker?

Mr Speaker: I ask Members not to try to debate that particular issue further. I understand what the Member said, and my information is that, if Mr Ford has not yet approached the Deputy Speaker, he intends to do so. As I look around the House, I recall that quite a number of Members, on occasion, come close to challenging the authority of the Chair. It is not only one Member or one party that does so.

Mrs D Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would be grateful if you would indicate to the House the role of the Assembly, given that the Minister was making statements on the high hedges legislation through the media this morning and not, at first, coming to the House.

Mr Speaker: The convention has always been very clear: as far as possible, I prefer Ministers to come to the House before going to the media. That has always been the convention in this House. I always encourage Ministers, irrespective of who they are, that it is

important for the House to have its rightful place in ministerial business.

Mrs D Kelly: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, will you write to all Ministers to remind them of the function of the Assembly and its primacy over the media?

Mr Speaker: Once again, I remind the whole House of the convention because it is not only Ministers who sometimes go to the press about issues that they may want to raise in the Chamber. Members also go to the press continually, even concerning private Members' motions. This is a reminder to the whole House that, as far as possible, all Members — especially Ministers — should give the House its place.

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the light of the rulings yesterday and today on the vote on the motion on compulsory voting, I ask that you clarify a matter to the House for future reference. In what circumstances can a Member withdraw a motion once it has been moved? Are any opportunities available to withdraw it?

Mr Speaker: The convention here, at Westminster and elsewhere is absolutely clear: once a motion is moved and debated, it can be withdrawn only by leave of the whole House. If even one Member objects, the motion cannot be withdrawn. It is not a majority of the House that determines whether a motion can be withdrawn: if one Member opposes the motion's being withdrawn, the motion must be voted on.

Before we move to today's business, I wish to deal with a point of order that Mr Wells raised during last Tuesday's sitting. It has been a long-standing convention in the House that a Member should not walk directly in front of another Member who has the Floor. Last week and yesterday, I watched quite a number of Members, especially those who came into the Chamber late, walk in front of the Member or even the Minister who had the Floor at the time.

Some Members seem to have forgotten the convention, but let this be a reminder to the whole House: I consider it highly discourteous to the Chair and to the Member who is speaking. I ask all Members to look about them before they move around the Chamber. That is particularly important for Members who come into the Chamber late. If they are likely to walk directly between a Member who has the Floor and the Chair, I ask that they please take a different route. If necessary, Members should use one of the Lobby doors.

I am grateful to Mr Wells for raising that point of order, because it is a matter that other Members have raised privately with me. I hope that that serves as a direct reminder to all Members. It is totally and absolutely wrong to walk in front of a Member who has the Floor.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I thank the Deputy Speaker for bringing the matter to your attention so quickly, and I thank you for dealing with it at the first available opportunity. The Member who suffers most is the honourable Member for North Down Mr Brian Wilson, because he happens to be seated immediately beside the entrance to the Chamber. As he tried to speak during the Second Stage of the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill, two Members who were engaged in conversation walked past him. That is even more discourteous. I ask you to enforce the ruling strictly, because such behaviour would not be tolerated in any other democratic Chamber. I ask you to urge your Deputy Speakers to ensure that, if anybody falls foul of your ruling, they be called to book immediately. If the behaviour is repeated, I ask that disciplinary action be taken against that Member.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for the points that he made. I intend to raise the issue today at the Business Committee in order to remind all Whips. I assure the Member that the Deputy Speakers and I, as Speaker, will very much keep a watching brief on the matter. We will deal with any Member who walks in front of a Member who has the Floor, because it is totally discourteous to do so. From now on, I will keep a watching brief on that issue.

Mr Shannon: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, there are many protocols on conduct in the Chamber about which we may all need to be reminded. One such protocol is that a Member who sits down after making a contribution should not leave the Chamber until the next Member to speak finishes his or her contribution. We often find that a Member makes a beeline for the door immediately after finishing his or her contribution. Perhaps, Mr Speaker, you will also consider that matter.

Mr Speaker: I am certainly prepared to look at that and to consider what can be done about it. Some of these issues are difficult, because one expects Members to at least have total respect for Standing Orders and conventions. Occasionally, Members may not respect one another, but let them respect conventions and Standing Orders.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Draft High Hedges Bill

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that he wishes to make a statement.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement about the draft high hedges Bill, which I issued for public consultation on 21 December 2009.

On taking office, I made clear my intention to introduce legislation to help those with the misfortune to have a neighbour who refuses to keep a hedge at a reasonable height. The Bill proposes to give councils the power to investigate complaints and, where appropriate, issue remedial notices requiring that such hedges be reduced to a specified height.

Problems between neighbours about high hedges have given rise to a steady stream of correspondence to public representatives. Often, the bone of contention is that very little can be done at present to resolve such situations. The availability of low-cost and often very fast-growing hedges, which are sometimes not well maintained, has increasingly led to disputes. A lot of ill feeling can arise if those issues are allowed to fester. If the problem continues, a person's quality of life can be greatly affected. In extreme cases, that can result in unnecessary stress and even ill health.

My Department has dealt with numerous requests for information since I came into office. Many Members have also received correspondence from constituents on this matter. In 2005, my Department's scoping exercise to assess the scale and spread of high hedge problems indicated that the issue caused widespread concern, which I cannot ignore. Loss of light due to a neighbouring high hedge has a significant impact on a person's reasonable enjoyment of their property, and that must be dealt with urgently.

I will illustrate how a high hedge issue can develop into a most unpleasant scenario. A retired couple, Mr and Mrs Black who live at 5 Primrose Lane, have a habit of relaxing in the mid-morning in their sitting room, dealing with the morning post and perhaps reading their newspapers, while sipping a cup of tea or coffee. Over the years, their routine has become one of life's little pleasures. As the summer sun streams through the bay windows that they are so proud of, having spent quite a considerable sum in having them double-glazed and repaired to save heating costs and to help the environment, they feel relaxed and at peace with the world.

They are interested to know who the new neighbours will be, as the house next door has recently been sold and the new occupants are due to arrive shortly. Mr

and Mrs Green, the new neighbours, move in. After getting the house sorted out, they decide to plant a fast-growing hedge on their side of the boundary with the Blacks. Within a few years, the hedge has grown to a height of 25 ft. Mr and Mrs Black can no longer enjoy the sunlight through their bay windows, because it is blocked by the high hedge.

Mrs Black approaches Mrs Green about the high hedge, but she is rebuffed. The same thing happens when Mr Black mentions it to Mr Green. In the meantime, the hedge grows even higher. What little sunlight there was has now been completely obliterated, and, despite repeated requests, Mr and Mrs Green refuse to do anything about it.

Mr and Mrs Black approach their solicitor for advice, but they are informed that there is little that can be done. There is no available legal avenue by which they can have the height of the hedge reduced. Of course, by this stage, the relationship between the Blacks and the Greens has soured to the extent that, in the normal course of events, they no longer greet each other, and stress levels give rise to the need for Mr and Mrs Black to go to their GP to receive medication.

10.45 am

Members can see the point that I am making. What appears to be a minor problem about the height of a hedge can be the source of a complete breakdown in good neighbourly relationships and give rise to all sorts of problems. Hence, I am pleased to be consulting on the draft Bill, because it is the first key stage in addressing the issue.

I intend to introduce a Bill to the Assembly by June this year. The draft Bill proposes a system that will allow those who feel that they have been badly affected by a neighbour's high hedge to complain to their local council. I emphasise that anyone who feels that they have a problem of that type must first try to resolve the situation with their neighbour through discussion.

I shall outline further what will be included in the scope of the draft legislation. The legislation will apply to evergreen or semi-evergreen hedges that consist of a line of two or more trees or shrubs. Complaints to councils will be able to be made only about hedges that are more than 2 m high and that affect residential property and access to light. The scope of the draft Bill does not extend to complaints about the impact of hedge roots or single trees. There are other ways to tackle such problems, for example, through the civil courts.

Complaints will be able to be brought to councils by the owner or occupier of an affected property. Where there is both an owner and an occupier, each will be entitled to complain. Indeed, the hedge in question may not necessarily be growing next door. In theory, the problem hedge could be several gardens down the

road, or it may extend over several properties. The important point is that councils will consider and evaluate the merits of each complaint and, before a complaint can be made, there will have to be evidence of an attempt to resolve the problem through discussion or mediation with the relevant neighbour. Only then will a council accept and investigate the complaint and decide what course of action is appropriate.

Councils will act as independent and impartial third parties, and they will not negotiate or mediate between individuals. Having established that there have been attempts to resolve the problem — without success — a council officer will visit and assess the extent of the problem. The impact on neighbouring properties' light and access will be considered, and the council officer will then decide what, if any, action should be taken. The council may then decide to issue a remedial notice requiring the hedge owner to reduce the height of the hedge to a reasonable height. Other courses of action, such as crown lifting or thinning or retaining selected trees in an otherwise reduced hedge, may be considered as alternative ways to alleviate the problem.

A remedial notice will specify the time frame in which work must be carried out. Before issuing a remedial notice, other important environmental factors, such as bird nesting seasons and tree preservation orders, will also be taken into consideration. I must emphasise that a remedial notice will not specify any action that will result in the height of a hedge being reduced to below 2 m or in the removal of a hedge. The draft Bill will not unnecessarily restrict the growth of hedges. Rather, it will ensure that a balance is achieved between the right to enjoy one's property and the benefits and amenity value that a well-maintained hedge can provide.

A remedial notice will remain in force even if a property changes ownership, and it will be registered as a statutory charge on the property. Therefore, new owners will bear the responsibility for compliance. A remedial notice will also include maintenance requirements to make sure that the problem does not occur again.

Of course, the parties that are involved in a complaint, the hedge owner and the complainant, may agree to carry out one-off works or long-term maintenance that is different from that specified in the remedial notice. In such cases, councils will have the power to relax the requirements of a remedial notice or to withdraw it altogether. However, if the work specified in a remedial notice is not carried out, the council may take legal action, and continued failure to carry out the required remedial work may result in fines being imposed by a Magistrate's Court.

If the owner or occupier of the land has failed to comply with the remedial notice, councils will be

given the power to enter the land where the hedge is situated and carry out the work specified. Councils will be able to recover the cost of that work from the hedge owner, and any unpaid expenses will be registered as a statutory charge on the property. The complainant and hedge owner will have the right to appeal against the issue or non-issue of a remedial notice and against the relaxation of its requirements. In order to help them to make a decision on an appeal, officials will consider the case files and will have the same powers of entry to affected properties as council officials.

Following an appeal, a remedial notice may be issued, withdrawn, or some of its requirements may be relaxed. Under the draft Bill, councils will have discretionary powers to levy fees for complaints, which will allow them to recover their costs and help prevent malicious complaints. However, it is right that councils should have discretion not to levy a fee and to take account of individual circumstances, such as when complainants are disadvantaged financially. The option to consider individual circumstances when setting fees and the limit to the level of any such fees may be put in place through secondary legislation.

The draft Bill on which I am seeking views closely mirrors provisions that have been in place in England and Wales for some years and should be equally effective in Northern Ireland. My hope is that, through the introduction of the legislation, neighbours will be encouraged to reach an amicable solution rather than resorting to formal complaints.

I am very pleased to have issued the draft Bill for consultation. I am encouraged by the fact that my Department has already received responses from members of the public who welcome the proposals and are supportive of the draft Bill. The consultation period will run until 1 March. The consultation may be viewed and downloaded from the DOE website.

I urge everyone with an interest to write to my Department with their views. All responses will be considered very carefully before the Bill is finalised.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mrs D Kelly): The Committee welcomes the Minister's proposals, but legislation on high hedges has been in demand for a long time. The consultation is a case of *déjà vu*, because there was a consultation in 2007, when Arlene Foster was Minister of the Environment. Unfortunately, the legislation was not progressed at that stage. Therefore, I welcome Minister Poots's commitment to seeing the legislation through, and the Committee will want to expedite it as quickly as possible.

Will the Minister tell us why it has taken so long to reach this stage, especially considering the fact that there has already been consultation on the issue and there is comparable legislation in other regions to draw

on? In fact, it has been four or five years since his Department first identified it as an issue of widespread concern. Furthermore, will the Minister and his Department be issuing guidance to local authorities in relation to the levy charges? We would like all councils to adopt a uniform approach.

The Minister of the Environment: I cannot speak for previous Ministers' priorities, but, when I came into office, a number of people identified the issue to me, and there was quite a caseload of correspondence. So, I decided to do something about it. Therefore, it is something that I want to deal with, and I want it dealt with before the new councils are in place in 2011.

We will look at the uniformity of prices and the charges that councils may impose, and we will encourage keeping costs to an absolute minimum, so that people will not be put off making a complaint due to cost. However, we should warn the public that the legislation will not be a means of bringing grievances against neighbours, and, if a council identifies that people are complaining purely out of a grievance, they will not benefit in any way, shape or kind. The complaint must be genuine, in that a household is being affected by loss of light, and it must be made for people's benefit and not be due to people's maliciousness.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for the excellent statement. It is the opportunity to solve a problem that has been an irritant for many people.

First, given the fact that legislation has been in place in England and Wales, has the Department taken advantage of its implementation there to ensure that what is put in place in Northern Ireland is fit for purpose? Secondly, as regards fees, I note from the Minister's statement that there is the opportunity — rightly so — to take a complainant's financial circumstances into account in a case. Will any consideration be given to the opportunity to vary the level of fees and charges for persistent malicious complaints to act as a deterrent to people who, as the Minister has described, seek simply to use the legislation to operate a grievance against their neighbour without just cause?

The Minister of the Environment: A council is certainly duty-bound to investigate an initial complaint. If it were found to be a grievance, rather than a genuine complaint, and persistent complaints were made by an individual, the council would be within its liberty to ignore subsequent complaints, having properly investigated the matter in the first instance. Therefore, I do not envisage that that should necessarily give rise to problems.

As regards the ability to waive fees for complainants, each council can adopt its own policy on the matter. However, it would focus largely on people

who are caused hardship as a consequence of having to pay those fees.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In some cases, indigenous species of trees cause problems, especially when they back onto social housing developments. Is there any scope in the draft Bill to address that issue? The Minister mentioned fast-growing species. Does the draft Bill include indigenous species?

The Minister of the Environment: I blame all of it on south Down because the Castlewellan Gold, which is a species of the Leyland cypress, originated from a tree in the Castlewellan estate arboretum in Northern Ireland. It is certainly one of the major causes of problems in urban settings.

Seriously, the draft legislation does not look at individual trees nor, indeed, native species of trees as such. Certain semi-evergreen trees are indigenous species. The draft Bill looks at instances when those trees are planted as hedges and cause problems. Therefore, individual trees are not the issue, and the draft legislation does not cover them. The issue is when someone plants a bank of trees that grows for a period of time and causes problems for neighbours in their home. Therefore, the matter is not about individual trees but about trees that are planted as hedging, as opposed to hedges being planted.

Mr K Robinson: I certainly welcome the Minister's statement. The draft legislation is long overdue. As someone who has raised the issue with, I believe, five previous Environment Ministers, I am delighted that, at last, there is movement on the issue. I cannot understand the reason for delay, given the fact that legislation is in place across the water.

I am somewhat disappointed that the draft Bill will not include the impact of roots. High hedges cause visible damage above ground. However, damage that is caused below ground, which can be equally devastating for owners of adjacent homes, cannot be seen.

The Sinn Féin Member raised a point about indigenous trees.

Mr Speaker: The Member must ask a question.

Mr K Robinson: I am coming to my question, Mr Speaker, which is about indigenous trees. Will the Minister also look at beech hedges, which are not evergreen or semi-evergreen but are quite widespread and tend to hold on to their leaves? Will he also look at the eucalyptus species, which is a more exotic visitor to our shores? It is another species that might cause problems in the future.

The Minister of the Environment: I thank the Member for his question. He has the grey hair to prove that he has sought the legislation from five previous Ministers. The draft Bill does not look at any particular

species of tree or hedge; it looks at evergreen and semi-evergreen varieties. Beech is slightly brown as opposed to green. Nonetheless, beech trees are always covered. The matter is not about leaves blowing into people's gardens; it is about the light to their homes being blocked.

We are not dealing with roots or leaves; we are dealing with light. Let me be clear about that. If the roots of an individual's trees are growing and damaging the sewerage system or lifting the driveway of his or her neighbour, there is a mechanism in place through which action can be taken through the civil courts. The aim of the draft Bill is to deal with the loss of light caused by trees, an issue for which there is no recourse.

11.00 am

Mr Lunn: I welcome the Minister's statement, as have other Members who have spoken. The issue must be one of the most contentious that we are faced with on a day-to-day basis. I am afraid that I also want to mention roots. If a hedge is cut down, it is probable that the root growth will be stimulated. That root growth can have a serious effect on the garden adjacent, without damaging the sewerage system, water pipes or foundations. It can restrict the ability of people to grow vegetation on their side of the hedge. Does the Minister intend to look at the situation in respect of roots when he is dealing with this necessary legislation?

The Minister of the Environment: We do not intend to consider that issue. However, we await the consultation process, and should the subject be raised regularly, we will look at whether it can be addressed. At this time, it is not our intention to deal with roots.

Mr Ross: I also welcome the statement, and I join those in the Chamber and those across the country who have been blighted with hedge-related problems for many years. In his statement, the Minister said that, in the first instance, individuals should try to resolve the situation with neighbours through discussions. First, many people, particularly elderly individuals, might feel anxious about approaching neighbours. What advice will the Minister give to those individuals? Secondly, what evidence is required to show that an individual has tried to resolve the situation through discussion with his or her neighbour? Thirdly, will members of the public be able to contact and seek advice and guidance from their local councils before going down the route of making a complaint?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member's latter point is important. In the first instance, individuals should be able to contact the councils for advice, as that will be of great benefit to them. If individuals feel that they cannot verbally contact someone, because it causes them anxiety, they can do so in writing. In most instances, individuals will

approach their neighbours on a one-to-one basis and have a conversation. They can take a note of that conversation and record the time and date at which it took place. If the neighbour refuses to co-operate, the complainant can go to his or her council and state that the neighbour will not co-operate on the issue and that it is causing considerable hardship as a consequence, and the council will step in and deal with the matter.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. To what extent will the draft Bill be retrospective? If a hedge or tree line, for instance, at a person's house has been well established for many years and a new home is built next door to his or her property, can the person who moves in next door make a complaint retrospectively?

The Minister of the Environment: I believe that that would be the case. The pertinent issue is whether the hedges are affecting people's light, particularly the light to the rear of a dwelling. If that is the case, people have the power to act. The draft Bill states that an individual has the right to have a hedge within an urban setting and that it can be considerably higher than 2 m if it is not affecting someone's light. If the hedge is affecting someone's light, the councils will have the power to request the owner to reduce the height of the hedge to 2 m. If people refuse to abide by such a request, the Magistrate's Court will have the power to deal with the issue.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the Minister's statement. The draft Bill is, no doubt, a move in the right direction. I welcome the Minister's desire to bring legislation forward as quickly as possible. The Minister's statement referred to the power that is being given to councils. What discussions has the Minister held with the local government sector, be that with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) or directly with local councils? Will the Minister give more detail on the role that the councils will have, because, as he rightly said, councils cannot be mediators in situations that arise from what are often neighbour disputes.

The Minister of the Environment: A scoping exercise carried out in 2005 received 641 responses. I have received requests from a number of councils to take action on the issue. I raised the matter at the Strategic Leadership Board, on which NILGA is represented, when I said that it was my intention to do so. It was widely welcomed by the Strategic Leadership Board, including its NILGA members. I have no doubt that councils will welcome the new power when it is introduced, because councillors, as public representatives, are aware that high hedges cause a problem for many in their constituencies and that the problem cannot currently be dealt with. Therefore, the introduction of enabling powers to deal

with the matter effectively is widely welcomed by local authorities.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's statement. Whatever happened in the past, the present Minister has brought the issue to the Floor. Although it may not excite the palates of those who live in their haciendas with their ha-has at the bottom of their lawns to guarantee them views of the countryside, it affects a lot of people in more urban areas. It is a particular problem for people living in housing estates. Has the Minister given any thought to looking at reserved matters and planning so that the problem does not arise in the first place and so that we do not have to clip it?

The Minister of the Environment: I am not aware of the ha-ha tree, and I am not sure that the legislation will cover that species. We have no intention to change the planning legislation. There are no planning laws that could be implemented whereby individuals could be banned from planting a particular species. In essence, the difficulty is not with the species: it is with the management of the species. If someone plants a fast-growing species, then he or she must be prepared to get the hedge clippers out annually and work on that species, otherwise it will quickly get out of control. We are not in the business of dictating what people can or cannot plant in their gardens. When it has an impact on their neighbours, however, we are in the business of ensuring that they will not inhibit the quality of life of others.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his statement. I do not, for one second, diminish the legislation. It is a bread-and-butter issue, and people in the street say that it makes a difference to them. I am pleased that we are able to look at the issue, and I thank the Minister for that.

I am intrigued by the Minister's statement. He referred to Mr and Mrs Black. I know a lot of people who go by the name of Mr and Mrs Black. Did the same Mr and Mrs Black who contacted me contact him? Dozens of people in my constituency want to see this legislative change.

Mr Speaker: Your question, please.

Mr Shannon: My question relates to local councils. Has finance been set aside for local councils to administer the proposals in the high hedges legislation? The Minister referred to the appeals process in his statement, and I am intrigued to see whether it will be independent and whether councils or other people will look after it. The Minister did not mention the height of hedges in his statement. Is it 6 ft, and if it is 6 ft —

A Member: It is 2 m.

Mr Shannon: Sorry, I must have missed that. I wanted to make sure about the height, as it is similar to the planning legislation.

Mr Speaker: Will you come to your question?

Mr Shannon: I have asked a myriad of questions. I welcome the legislative change before us.

The Minister of the Environment: The hedge should be no more than 2 m high, which is 6 ft 6 in. Most of us are not much taller than 6 ft, and our eye line would be slightly below that. Two metres is a reasonable height for maintaining privacy, unless a giant lives next door.

The appeals process would be dealt with at officer level in councils. Individuals who wish to appeal would go through their local council and deal with a council officer of considerable rank to ensure that the process is carried out properly and fully.

Mr Craig: I also warmly welcome both the proposed introduction of the legislation and the Minister's input to it. Unfortunately, I have dealt with several constituency problems in which not only the height of hedges are inappropriate and causing difficulties, but where they have been planted on blind corners in housing estates and have grown well in excess of the 2 m that the Minister suggested. Therefore, not only are the hedges blocking light but they are causing sight line problems. Will the Minister assure the House that he will consider that issue? A maximum height of 2 m may be inappropriate in such cases, and no legislation covers a reduction of hedge height to improve sight line around corners.

The Minister of the Environment: I am in interested in what the Member said, and I will seek to clarify that matter. I would have thought that Roads Service would be able to act against individuals who have planted anything that would block a sight line. However, the Department will seek clarity from Roads Service on the existing legislation, and if the issue that the Member highlighted is not covered, Roads Service will consider whether it can be addressed through the proposed Bill.

Mr B Wilson: I also welcome the proposed legislation. I particularly welcome the Minister's enthusiasm for it, because previous Ministers have not shown the same determination in the past.

Under the English system, someone who wants a high hedge to be investigated must pay a fee of around £500 or more, and there is some indication that people have been deterred from complaining as a result of that fee. The Minister also discussed the appeals mechanism and stated that the appropriate council will consider appeals. In the UK legislation, provision is made to allow an appeal to the relevant Secretary of State. Will that mechanism be in the proposed Bill?

The Minister of the Environment: I have enough problems without considering appeals on whether a hedge should be allowed to remain at 3 m or 4 m or

reduced to 2 m. The Department will consider all that, and the Magistrate's Court can always deal with cases in which people do not wish to co-operate with councils.

The Department will work closely with local authorities to set a non-prohibitive cost for those who wish to have a high hedge investigated. The figure that the Member quoted is higher than anyone should pay, and the Department will seek to introduce a considerably lower fee in Northern Ireland.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Pensions Regulator Tribunal (Transfer of Functions) Bill

Final Stage

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

That the Pensions Regulator Tribunal (Transfer of Functions) Bill [NIA 4/09] do now pass.

As I said in earlier debates, the Bill is a strict parity measure to effect the transfer of the Pensions Regulator Tribunal's functions in respect of Northern Ireland to the new Tribunals Service simultaneously with Britain. The Bill makes provisions that correspond to those in the transfer Order that relates to England, Scotland and Wales and that was approved at Westminster on 5 January 2010. The Bill also includes amendments to primary legislation, consequential on the transfer of function, and re-enacts existing provisions that relate to offences where, for example, a person fails to produce documents to the new tribunals. It also includes the provision to allow the Department to make consequential or incidental amendments to subordinate legislation by way of an Order, subject to the confirmatory procedure. The Bill makes transitional provision to ensure a smooth transfer of any cases that are under way at the date of transfer, for example, allowing them to continue under the new structure.

The provisions of the Bill ensure that, in transferring the functions of the Pensions Regulator Tribunal to the new Tribunals Service structure, the right to a fair and independent appeal is maintained for people in Northern Ireland. We all agree that it is important that people here continue to have a right of appeal to an independent appeal tribunal in relation to determinations of the Pensions Regulator, not least to ensure compatibility with article 6 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

11.15 am

I thank the Chairman and Committee for Social Development, and Members in general, for their support in progressing the Bill.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton): I apologise for being a little late for the start of the debate. I am sure that the Minister has accurately summarised the key points of the Pensions Regulator Tribunal (Transfer of Functions) Bill, and I do not propose to repeat the points that she made. In brief, as the House is aware, the Pensions Regulator Tribunal is an independent appeal tribunal that was established under the Pensions Act 2004, and

which hears appeals against determinations of the Pensions Regulator.

The Pensions Regulator Tribunal provides enhanced transparency and accountability in respect of the functions of the Pensions Regulator. It also, crucially, provides some opportunity for redress when the determinations of the Pensions Regulator are challenged.

Although the UK has many work-based pension schemes, the services of the Pensions Regulator Tribunal have not been used excessively since its inception. Indeed, it is understood that, of the eight appeals to the Pensions Regulator Tribunal made throughout the UK since 2004, only one has proceeded to consideration by the tribunal itself. It is understood that none of those eight appeals were related to work-based pension schemes here in Northern Ireland. Despite that, the presence of the tribunal, and its remit in respect of the whole of the UK, is an essential part of the regulatory regime, which maintains confidence in the occupational pensions system.

The Department has brought forward the Bill to effect the desired transfer of functions in Northern Ireland from the Pensions Regulator Tribunal to the First-tier Tribunal and the Upper Tribunal of the Tribunals Service. The Committee is satisfied that the Bill will have a minimal impact on the services that are provided by the Pensions Regulator Tribunal in Northern Ireland, and that the Bill will continue the long-standing principle of parity between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK on pensions matters.

In conclusion, I am happy to advise that, as the Bill will lead to no detriment for the people of Northern Ireland, the Committee for Social Development commends the Pensions Regulator Tribunal (Transfer of Functions) Bill to the House, and recommends that the Bill do now pass.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As has been stated by the Minister and Mr Hamilton, the provisions of the Bill merely give effect to the transfer of functions of the Pensions Regulator Tribunal to the new Tribunals Service structure, which is in line with England, Scotland and Wales. The provisions are purely technical in nature, and will effect the transfer of functions so that people here continue to have rights of appeal to an independent tribunal. That is important. As has been stated, to date no appeals from the North have gone to the Pensions Regulator Tribunal, so I support the Bill.

Ms Lo: I support the Bill. Even though it has rarely happened here, it is important that people in Northern Ireland keep parity with the rest of the UK in continuing to have the right of appeal to an independent tribunal.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development,

Mr Brady and Ms Lo for their contributions to the debate. We all agree that it is important that a right of appeal against decisions of the Pensions Regulator is safeguarded for people in Northern Ireland, and that is precisely what the Bill does. Although the Bill is somewhat technical, it is nonetheless an important piece of legislation.

I hope that I have responded satisfactorily to all the points that have been raised by the three Members who spoke. I am grateful to the Committee for Social Development and to Members for their positive contribution to the progress of the Bill and for the level of consensus that the Bill has enjoyed right across the Floor. I am pleased to commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pensions Regulator Tribunal (Transfer of Functions) Bill [NIA 4/09] do now pass.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Warm Homes Scheme

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

Mr Hamilton: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the valuable contribution of the warm homes scheme, since its inception, in improving the energy and fuel efficiency of thousands of homes, and in tackling fuel poverty in Northern Ireland; welcomes the allocation of over £20 million to the scheme in this financial year; notes with concern the low levels of heating installations this year to date; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to examine the progress of the scheme and to review the eligibility criteria with a view to making them more flexible in respect of heating replacements while still focusing on people most in need.

Members are well aware of the particular problems that fuel poverty poses for people in Northern Ireland, and the matter has been debated umpteen times in the House. Historically at least, the warm homes scheme has been an effective and successful scheme in tackling fuel poverty. I think that I am contractually obliged to say that the warm homes scheme was introduced in the early part of the previous decade by DUP Ministers for Social Development, and, after making that obvious party political plug, I will move to the seriousness of the problem.

The warm homes scheme has been the number one weapon of the Department for Social Development against fuel poverty, and it has been very effective. Since the inception of the scheme in 2001, some 70,000 insulation and heating interventions have been made, so it has been a significant contributor in the war against fuel poverty and the fight for better fuel and energy efficiency in many homes. Such has been the importance of the scheme that, this year, the Minister has ring-fenced £20.5 million of her budget for the warm homes scheme. That highlights the importance of the scheme, and other areas have had to suffer because that money has been ring-fenced. I will return to the point about the budget later, which underscores the scheme's importance to the Department, and all Members will support that point.

In my own limited way, I have tried to support and help scheme operators to highlight the scheme. I have every confidence in their ability to deliver the scheme, and I give full support to them. However, my doubts are that the criteria in the scheme do not allow them to do the job as effectively as they could. It gives me no pleasure to say that, particularly in the area of heating, the warm homes scheme is not working as effectively as it could.

There is ample evidence to support that claim. Answers to Assembly questions that were put by me and other Members show that, in the first eight months of the current financial year, only £2.3 million of the £20 million budget has been spent on all types of interventions. Therefore, it is difficult to see how the whole budget could be expended or how the Department's stated target of 10,000 interventions will be achieved. Indeed, in response to me and other Members, the Department has said that there is some divergence over that target of 10,000 interventions. Only last week, the scheme operators told the Committee for Social Development that their target is 9,000 interventions.

The Committee has received regular correspondence from an energy company that shows that it believes that the scheme is not working in respect of heating. One operator has had 60 gas meters requested out of a total of over 100 referrals, and 19 gas meters have been requested from another operator from a total of 63 referrals. National Energy Action, which is a key group on the issue of fuel poverty, came to the Committee at a stakeholder event that we held last year and told members of its concerns, particularly on how the heating element of the scheme was operating or not operating.

It is clear from the paper that the scheme operators presented to the Committee for Social Development last week that only 6% of their work to date has involved any type of heating intervention. They have had 162 heating interventions so far, against a contractual target for the current financial year of 750. According to the figures that H&A Mechanical Services and the Northern Ireland Energy Agency, which jointly operate the scheme, presented to the Committee for Social Development, they have installed only 162 heating interventions since they took on the scheme in July 2009.

It is clear from all that evidence that the scheme is falling far short of what is expected and what is acceptable. Given that only £2.3 million has been spent out of a £20 million budget, it appears that there is no chance of getting all that money spent in the limited time that is left in the financial year.

Underspends can sometimes be understandable; however, that underspend is not acceptable because it means that not as many people as envisaged will get the help that they desperately need. It also begs the question that if that expenditure was ring-fenced, what about the areas from which it was taken? Lots of other voices, not necessarily in the Chamber, will be screaming at the end of the financial year if money is handed back that could have been spent on other heating and energy efficiency interventions; across Housing Executive stock, for example.

I consider the heating element of the scheme as being most important, because it had accounted for about one third of interventions. Although insulation is essential and important, people are literally burning money if they have a broken, busted or totally inefficient heating system. Money is just being wasted. The importance of a sound heating system cannot be overstated.

We also have to ask whether, in the new contract, the heating aspect of the scheme was always set up to fail. The target for the operators has been to increase energy efficiency in homes by 15%. Although that is a significant improvement, it can be achieved in most instances by improving insulation. Therefore, there is no incentive to deliver better heating systems too.

As we face the coldest winter for 30 years, it would be criminal if a significant chunk of money was underspent this year when there are so many opportunities to intervene and to have better heating systems in houses in all parts of the community across Northern Ireland. The question then has to be: what can be done? It is no good coming to the House and complaining that something is wrong and, like that age-old cry on radio phone-in shows, that something must be done. We need to offer a viable way forward.

First and foremost, the Department should look at changing the eligibility criteria. Flexibility needs to be shown. One can be critical, but it is not a case of the old contract versus the new one, because they are different contracts. However, there is a flaw in the current contract, and the criteria need to be amended so that assistance can get to those who need it. At present, heating-intervention prioritisation is for only coal, LPG or Economy 7 properties. There is no provision for the replacement, or repair, of broken, or inefficient, oil or gas systems. Only coal, LPG or Economy 7 systems meet the criteria, and they will be replaced. That narrows the field too tightly for the scheme to be as effective as we would like it to be.

We have to ask whether it is right that people in homes with broken or wasteful heating systems cannot apply for assistance. Such people sometimes qualify under the benefits criteria, but do not get the intervention that they need because they do not have the right heating system. It is not right that operators have to walk out of properties in which people have broken heating systems and not do anything: I know that that is the case. They can pump a whole house with white beads and insulate lofts to the nth degree, but they cannot fix a heating system because the criteria do not allow them to do so. That is not right.

Flexibility needs to be shown with the criteria. I understand that there is scope within the contract for that flexibility. However, if that scope is not there, and nothing can be done, we have to seriously question the

validity of the original contract, and how good and tight it was in the first place. If the criteria are not altered, the problem will persist, because those who fit the criteria have always been small in number. During the eight-year lifetime of the old contract, only 1,376 conversions were made from coal, LPG or Economy 7. That is a very small, tight number of people. First and foremost, therefore, the eligibility criteria need to be examined, reviewed and, hopefully, amended to allow more people to get the interventions that they require.

Clearly, there is a need for marketing by the scheme operators. I know that they have been trying hard, and it was understandably slow for them to start because the contract is new. They had a lot of infrastructure to put in place to get going. There is also an onus on us and other community representatives to get on board with the operators to promote the scheme in our areas. I know that many Members have already been doing that.

I hope that the Minister and the Department do not see this as some sort of attack on them, individually or collectively. What the Committee and other Members have identified is a problem, and we want to see it resolved.

11.30 am

There has been criticism, which led to changes in the contract and in the overall scheme, resulting from a PAC report and an Audit Office report. We all fear that type of report, but we must be mindful that the PAC and the Audit Office do not run this country; the Assembly does. If we want to see changes, we should make them. There is a real requirement for changes to be made. If there is a fear of change because of the possibility of a PAC report, we have to say that the level of failure that we see in respect of heating interventions will only elicit a further PAC report.

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

Mr Hamilton: I urge the Assembly to support this reasonable call for change in the eligibility criteria, so that people in Northern Ireland who suffer from fuel poverty can get the help that they require.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion. For many in our community, the warm homes scheme has been a lifeline that ensures that the home is heated to a standard that protects them and their families from the cold. It offers help to those who live in poorly insulated homes and gives a degree of hope to those most in need, as they know that there is someone who will assist them to get over cold periods that would otherwise have a serious impact on their health.

I was concerned to learn that the scheme was to be given to two separate contractors, and I thought that that would have a detrimental effect on the smooth

delivery of the scheme. The jury is still out on that. I also have serious concerns about the way the Department handled the changeover from the old contract to the new. The delay had major impacts on those waiting for applications to be processed, and any review of how the new scheme is progressing must also include the way the Department managed that changeover. We are also concerned about changes in the criteria, which, we fear, will deny help to people who were previously eligible for the scheme, and we find that our concerns are well founded because of the changes in criteria. They have left some people, literally, out in the cold.

I contacted representatives from one of the community enterprises that now have the contract to deliver warm homes. They said that they were concerned that a high percentage of those who had applied would not now be eligible because of the changes in criteria. We were told at the time that there would be no impact on those who had already applied to the scheme for assistance, but that has not been the case. I am concerned that many of those who would previously have qualified for the scheme live in conditions that impact adversely on their health. They have been refused assistance because they are no longer eligible. That must be addressed by the Minister.

At last week's meeting of the Committee for Social Development, we had a presentation from the two groups that won the tender to deliver the warm homes scheme. I am familiar with the work of Bryson Charitable Group, which has an excellent record in community endeavours. Both contractors delivered excellent presentations, during which they supplied figures that caused the Committee great concern. I wish both contractors well in their delivery of the scheme.

The contractors stated that, of the 22,537 people who have applied to join the scheme, only 6,885 were successful. Some 5,062 applicants were referred from the old scheme to the new. They were contacted by the new contractors, and 2,618 of them were registered for the new scheme. Only 1,757 applicants were eligible, and, to date, only 375 dwellings have been helped. That raises serious questions about the way the Department delayed the scheme and casts no reflection on the enterprises that have to deliver the scheme. The Minister must tell us why that has taken place and whether the £20 million available to run the scheme will be spent. If it is not spent, will it be lost to the scheme for next year? She must also explain to those who no longer qualify for the scheme why the criteria have been changed and why they cannot have their cold homes treated.

I appeal to the Minister, at this late stage, to review the changes and reverse her decision. That would ensure that people now living in cold homes will have the required work completed. I ask her to initiate a review of how this has been handled by the Department.

Furthermore, any review should consider the introduction of a boiler scrappage scheme, such as that introduced in England from 18 January. Some research must be done into how effective that would be in the North: that would have to be carried out quickly. I ask the Minister to ensure that that is done. This scheme has the potential to help vulnerable households in fuel poverty.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Members who tabled this important motion. The warm homes scheme is important to every constituency but particularly my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, which is one of the areas that have benefited most from it. I place on record my appreciation of the scheme, because it has done significant good and has been of great value to many homes throughout the Province. It is and has been a valuable scheme. However, I am concerned that some people are not reaping all its benefits at the moment.

Mr Hamilton and Mr Brady gave us quite a lot of statistics, so I will not go over those. However, it is evident that the scheme has the potential to do a lot more good work in society. For Members who are not overly aware of the scheme, I will highlight some of the good work that it has done. I know senior citizens and vulnerable people who did not have the opportunity to enjoy a warm home — that is the reality — until the scheme was implemented.

The scheme has been littered with problems, such as the fitting and maintenance of heating systems, but those were the fault of the contractors who fitted the systems, rather than the scheme. Therefore, some work remains to be done there.

I am particularly concerned about the change to the scheme's criteria that was introduced last summer, because certain households cannot now avail themselves of a heating upgrade. Heating upgrades are one of the scheme's big benefits, and I am assuming that there was a big uptake of that. Heating upgrades are vital if we are to reduce energy usage and ensure that we keep emissions as low as possible. Many old boilers and heating systems are inefficient. Given the money that is available, I would have thought that it would have been possible to continue the upgrades that were applied for before the old scheme was closed last summer. Will the Minister elaborate on why that is not possible and whether it will be possible to look again at that issue at some stage? That is important.

Mr Brady mentioned the boiler scrappage scheme. I received a letter from the Minister on that issue this morning, and she calls the scheme the "boiler replacement scheme", which is a much better term for it. I am keen for that scheme to be progressed in Northern Ireland as quickly as possible. The Minister has indicated that that will not be possible unless it is based on the model that the UK Government use, but

she does not feel that that is totally appropriate because she wants the scheme to be directed at the most vulnerable people, and I agree with that. However, surely there is a mechanism whereby we can transpose the legislation and make some minor amendments to it, thereby allowing the scheme to be put in place quickly in Northern Ireland. That would alleviate some of the problems and difficulties that we face in trying not only to meet targets but to ensure that people get the best benefits from the entire scheme.

Mr Burns: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the topic. If I had to give 100% support to one Government initiative, it would be the warm homes scheme. That has been a great success and has made a big difference to the quality of many people's lives. It is good that the DUP motion recognises the value and contribution of the scheme in tackling fuel poverty. I welcome Simon Hamilton's recognition of the great benefits of the warm homes scheme.

I am greatly saddened by the fact that, during the recent cold weather, families and pensioners were freezing in their homes because they were too frightened to switch on the heating for fear of getting big bills in a few weeks' time. We have done our best to help pensioners. They have their winter fuel payment, which is between £250 and £400, and some people have been able to benefit from three additional cold weather payments of £25. Although that money helps people get through the winter, week by week, it neither lowers their bills in the long run nor improves the quality of their housing. The warm homes scheme, however, makes a real difference in that regard. To date, around £120 million has been spent on improving more than 70,000 homes. I am sure that everyone in the House will agree that it is a very good scheme, and we offer our congratulations and highest praise to everyone involved in it.

Since it started in 2001, the warm homes scheme has been a great success. I commend the Minister for allocating a further £20 million to the scheme in the current financial year. That money will go a long way to eliminating fuel poverty. If the Minister's Department were not so badly underfunded, I am sure that she would want to contribute more money to the programme. Every Member is aware of the lack of money available to DSD and of the reason for that funding shortfall. Therefore, I will not dwell on the issue.

Mr Hamilton: The Member highlighted the budgetary problems that the Minister faces, and I think that we would all acknowledge that the Minister, in common with most Executive Ministers, could spend much more money than she has. However, does he accept that £20 million has been ring-fenced in the Budget for the warm homes scheme and that, according to figures presented to the Committee for Social Development, the scheme will not expend all that money this year?

Therefore, the argument around the warm homes scheme is not one of resources.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Burns: That £20 million has been ring-fenced to protect the vulnerable through the warm homes scheme.

I share Members' concerns about the number of new heating systems that have been installed this year. However, I am sure that we are still on course to meet the long-term targets that have been set. As I said, we all know that money is limited, and, therefore, most Members will agree that we should target what resources we have at people on low incomes, people with no central heating and people who have only coal fires. Although we recognise the importance of conducting repairs and upgrades, people without central heating are very cold, and identifying inefficient heating systems should be a priority.

It is worth noting that the insulation of new heating systems is one aspect only of the warm homes scheme. Insulation is very important; however, there is no point in insulating the roof space and walls of a house if the heating system is very inefficient. Neither is there any point in having a state-of-the-art heating system but no insulation, because the heat will go out through the roof. In an ideal world, we would like to see good insulation and heating systems in all houses. If that could be done, we would make giant strides towards eliminating fuel poverty. That is the SDLP's aim, one that I am sure all Members share.

Ms Lo: I thank the Members who tabled what is a very timely motion, given that concerns have arisen over the new eligibility criteria for the warm homes scheme and the possibility of there being a big underspend.

The warm homes scheme is a very worthwhile Government initiative, and, since its introduction in 2001, more than £180 million has been spent on improvements to more than 71,000 homes. In Northern Ireland, people are more likely than those in Great Britain to live in fuel poverty because of the lower average income and the higher cost of energy. The most recent figure on fuel poverty in Northern Ireland dates from 2006 and shows that 34% of households live in fuel poverty. Estimates for early 2009 suggest that that figure may have increased to 44% because of the economic downturn.

11.45 am

Following a recent review, the scheme now targets dwellings with no central heating, solid fuel central heating or Economy 7 central heating. The Social Development Committee recently met the two new scheme operators, who took over last July. The operators have been given a £20.5 million budget for 2009-2010 to achieve a target of 9,000 energy efficiency interventions. Of the 22,000 applicants for

the new scheme, only 7,000 were successful. Work on around one third of the homes of successful applicants is complete, but work on the rest is still in progress. It appears that the potential for underspend is great. If so, the criteria could be revised to include people who have oil or gas systems that are old and inefficient. The cost of replacing an old oil or gas system can be up to £5,000, which is surely too much for many people. However, people with any type of oil or gas system are automatically disqualified from receiving a new heating system, regardless of how inefficient or old their current system may be.

If there is money about, the scheme could be widened to aid people with boiler repairs. During the recent spell of cold weather, many people suffered from boiler breakdowns. Unless people have insurance or savings, repairing their boiler can be very expensive. The call-out charge alone can be as high as £40 or £50. The boiler scrappage scheme in England, which was mentioned by others, could be extended to Northern Ireland. Under that scheme, people receive £400 towards the cost of replacing their current old and inefficient boilers with high-efficiency A-rated or renewable technology boilers. That assists with reducing the cost of heating. In England, many energy companies have pledged to match the £400 from the scheme, which will be of much benefit.

In December, constituents made enquiries at my office because their boiler had broken down during the spell of cold weather. Those people did not have insurance and, therefore, could not afford the necessary repairs. Under the current scheme, they did not qualify for any assistance. If there is money in the pot, is it not a pity that those people cannot be helped?

I fully support the motion and call on the Minister to monitor the progress of the scheme and to be more flexible with the eligibility criteria so that we can help to lift as many people as possible out of fuel poverty.

Mr Easton: If I were to characterise my contribution, I would say to the Minister for Social Development that the warm homes scheme has done much but there is much more to do. None of us would diminish the role of the warm homes scheme in making the daily lives of our people much better. Sadly, cases in which some of our most needy and vulnerable people were literally forced to make a choice between food and fuel are within recent memory. There have been cases in which people have burned necessary household furniture, such is their distress. In the most difficult case that I am aware of, a family in abject poverty burned a household door to heat their home. Therefore, let nobody doubt the critical nature of the warm homes scheme. The warm homes scheme should play the cardinal role in seeking to champion the needs of people in poverty. I propose that we maintain the warm

homes scheme, because it is the greatest tool that we have to address fuel poverty.

It is always vital to target limited resources, and our resources are finite. Although many people unfairly deride the achievements of our devolved democracy, they should recognise the substantial fact that some £20 million has been directed to the warm homes scheme in this financial year against a backdrop of the most strained economic circumstances that many of us have experienced in our lifetime.

As a critical friend of the warm homes scheme, I believe that we must constantly monitor and evaluate what is working and what we can do better. Where are the gaps in the service that we can target for positive change, while being mindful to protect the existing service? The Minister should address herself to the eligibility criteria. There is space to look towards heating replacements while affording protection to those who are most in need.

The reason for Northern Ireland's special circumstances can be set out with an adequate evidence base of support. We live in a typically colder climate than our counterparts in England and Wales, and our mean average temperature, as confirmed by the Met Office, is between 8.5°C and 9.5°C. In England, that figure is 8.5°C to 11°C, and it is 9.5°C to 10.5°C in Wales. Moreover, our population is widely dispersed and, therefore, is not enclosed in "heat islands" that allow for lower heating requirements.

Given Northern Ireland's reliance on home heating oil, we are at the mercy of fluctuating oil prices. Moreover, the gas industry is still at a stage of relative infancy; that compounds our vulnerability. We must not forget that, in any reasonable compare-and-contrast analysis, Northern Ireland has a generally lower income than other parts of the United Kingdom. If the Minister gets it right, health will improve. I do not need to explain the link between fuel poverty or cold homes and influenza, heart disease and stroke. Before anyone leaves with the false belief that the problem affects only the elderly, I point them to the Public Health Policy Centre's 2009 research, which shows that those health impacts occur across the lifespan and are not confined to senior citizens.

Credit is due on the issue of insulation. Between 1 April and 30 November 2009, 1,808 home insulations and 303 heating interventions were installed, at a cost of £2.3 million. Those developments will manifest themselves in warmer homes, real cost savings in hard-pressed times and environmental benefits. Can we work smarter and deliver more without hindering those who are most in need?

We note the Minister's answer in relation to the commitment to the Programme for Government, when she said that she hoped to address energy efficiencies

in all the homes in question as a result of the revised warm homes scheme. We need the action proposed in the motion because fuel poverty is occurring. People are living in cold, damp, thermally inefficient houses. We need to advance from a position in which people spend in excess of 10% of their household income on energy just to get adequate heat into their home.

We must protect the vulnerable. Although I said that the issue does not affect elderly people exclusively, three million pensioners in the United Kingdom are fuel-poor, and fuel poverty is the main cause of excess winter deaths. Given that this is the twenty-first century, we should collectively hang our heads in shame about that fact. The specific challenge that the Minister faces is to address the eligibility criteria for heating replacements with a view to increasing their flexibility. I support the motion.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion.

The first part of the motion refers to the valuable contribution that the warm homes scheme has made and, according to other Members' contributions, is continuing to make. I commend the Minister and the Department for their work on the issue. However, as other Members said, the second part of the motion highlights the fact that the recently introduced criteria have created some problems. If that is the case — I may have heard somewhere that a review on those matters is under way — it is important to take the opportunity to make a case for what might be looked at in any forthcoming review and consultation. I repeat: the warm homes scheme is extremely valuable.

Alex Easton mentioned the connection between having a warm home and health. Professor Liddell of the University of Ulster has done a considerable amount of work on the issue and gave a briefing on it in Strabane some time ago. Evidence has been gathered in the past two years concerning the connection between having somewhere warm to live and health. Professor Liddell said:

"a lack of affordable warmth is a primary contributor to health inequalities."

The evidence supports Professor Liddell's view that the lack of somewhere warm to stay in which to rear a family will result in health inequalities. Professor Liddell outlined in some detail the situation in the Strabane District Council area. She said, "Baseline health is relatively poor". Further analysis of the situation revealed that there were a number of contributing factors. One, perhaps, is that two thirds of the Strabane District Council area is rural. In case I run out of time, I must acknowledge that DARD has made a substantial contribution towards alleviating fuel poverty in rural areas. I hope that I am right in saying that it has allowed for a top-up of funding from DSD.

That is an indication that when Departments work together there can be a positive outcome.

Health inequalities merit attention, especially if there is to be a review of the warm homes scheme. The motion asks the Minister for Social Development to make the scheme's eligibility criteria more flexible. I agree: if there is flexibility, we may be able to deliver the scheme in a better and more positive way.

A budget of £20 million has been ring-fenced for the warm homes scheme, but it would be unforgivable if some of that money went back to the Treasury and was not focused, as the motion asks, on those who are most in need. If a householder's heating system is not working and the person who has been sent to sort it out has to go away and leave it —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs McGill: I hope that any review carried out by the Department for Social Development will consider all those matters.

Mr G Robinson: First and foremost, I thank the Minister for Social Development for her input on the warm homes scheme and Mr Morrow, from my party, who introduced the scheme in the previous Assembly. Many points have already been covered in the debate, but I want to stress to the Minister the number of complaints that I received in my office and at the events that were jointly organised by me and my East Londonderry colleagues, Mr Campbell and Mr McQuillan. The new scheme may allow for a wider range of applicants, but the problem lies in what is now available.

One of the main bones of contention is boiler replacement. When the news was announced that a boiler scrappage scheme was being implemented in England, my office phone was red-hot with questions about whether it applied here.

When we informed the callers that the scheme did not extend to Northern Ireland, we received an understandably angry reaction.

12.00 noon

I ask the Minister to examine the qualifying criteria and what is available under the scheme to ensure that those who need help most will receive maximum benefit, particularly after the very cold winter that we have had so far. The scheme must also include boiler replacement, as that is one area in which major improvement is required.

I appreciate that there are many demands on the Minister's budget, but I urge her to look at those two specific areas. I want to see the people whose needs are greatest becoming the greatest beneficiaries. I would like to think that the Minister will spend the £20

million available to her to rectify the situation, because it is essential that she does so.

Mr Armstrong: I thank the Member for proposing the motion. Although the primary focus of the motion is the warm homes scheme, it broadly seeks to address the problem of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland fuel poverty strategy has set an ambitious target for the eradication of fuel poverty in vulnerable households by 2010 and in non-vulnerable households by 2016. Unfortunately, the reality is that the Department for Social Development and its partners in the Executive will fail to meet the first target and, at the current rate, are likely to miss the 2016 target also.

Northern Ireland has a much higher rate of fuel poverty than the rest of the United Kingdom; therefore, tackling fuel poverty must be one of the top priorities of the Executive. Although the debate is primarily about energy efficiency, in recent times the dominant factors contributing to the rise in fuel poverty have been ever-increasing fuel costs and the recession. Therefore, it is obvious that, although improving energy efficiency will help mitigate the effects of fuel poverty, it will not solve the problem.

It is crucial that all Departments are committed to tackling the problem of fuel poverty. We need to further develop a holistic approach to doing so. Northern Ireland relies too heavily on imported and expensive fossil fuels. The strategic energy review and the development of meaningful competition and consumer choice are crucial. The economy has taken a prolonged hit, and any support that we can offer businesses and employers to survive and thrive in the future will be critical to the overall prosperity of Northern Ireland. We must ensure that vulnerable groups take up the benefits to which they are entitled and that energy efficiency tools are utilised to the maximum.

I congratulate the Minister for Social Development on the fact that over 70,000 households have been assisted by the warm homes scheme over the past nine years. It has proven hugely popular and successful. However, the figures that I have for this financial year show that only 379 homes have been assisted, which suggests that something has gone wrong since the change in qualifying criteria. The Minister has a public service agreement (PSA) target to implement energy efficiency measures in 100,000 homes, and I am keen to hear an update from her on the reasons for such low figures. I ask that she provides a progress report.

It appears that the work completed to date accounts for just over £3.2 million of the £20 million budget. Qualifying properties are those that use coal, gas and Economy 7 heating systems only, which results in some eligible households not being in a position to

have their heating system repaired or upgraded, even if it is highly inefficient or broken. That is a problem.

An ongoing review of the new system is necessary and would be welcomed. Fuel poverty is a serious problem in Northern Ireland and affects many groups, including the working poor. The warm homes scheme is the policy tool over which we have the most control, and it is the one that can have the most immediate effect. It is crucial that we get it right. I support the motion.

Mrs M Bradley: I thank the Member for bringing the motion to the Floor of the House, because it concerns a topic that people constantly come to my constituency office to talk about. I understand Mr Hamilton's concerns about the new criteria for the warm homes scheme. I also acknowledge that the new criteria were implemented following recommendations that were made by the Audit Office and accepted by the Public Accounts Committee. The original scheme, which allowed old and non-efficient boilers to be replaced, represented best value for money and maximised the alleviation of fuel poverty.

Fuel poverty is a big problem in my constituency. I am grateful that the Minister for Social Development has built an exceptional circumstances clause into the warm homes scheme. Boilers can now be replaced if there is a health and safety issue. Although that is at the discretion of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, something is better than nothing in these financially restricted times. I am also glad that there will be a review of the scheme's delivery and operative criteria at the end of its first year.

In recent years, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has withdrawn many Economy 7 heaters from its housing stock and replaced them with oil central heating. Many customers now find that they cannot heat their homes because of excessive and ever-increasing fuel prices. A substantial number of households that were already facing difficulties are now also suffering the impact of one or even two parents having been made redundant, due to the economic downturn. Such incidents were reflected in the Institute of Public Health's December 2009 update on fuel poverty and health. Fuel poverty increased from 34% in 2006 to 44% in early 2009.

Almost 1,000 people die in Northern Ireland each year because of winter conditions. Faced with such statistics, it is difficult to disagree that the warm homes scheme should be refocused to prioritise homes that have no form of central heating. I will continue to lobby for the expansion of the warm homes scheme. However, given that recent figures indicate an annual 3% increase in fuel poverty and that Departments are required to make annual 3% efficiency savings, it is difficult to see a way out of the dire situation.

As a member of the Committee for Social Development, I look forward to the departmental officials' briefing on fuel poverty. I ask my colleague the Minister for Social Development to give direction, where possible, within the confines of the principles identified in the recommendations of the Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee towards expanding the scheme and reducing its limitations. I admire the Minister's dedication to the delivery of an effective scheme and the Trojan work that she has done to date. I support the motion and hope that the required changes will be made.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion and thank the Members who tabled it. As Members have indicated, many people in the Province are ice cold in their homes this winter, despite having their heating on at full power. Indeed, I have been in homes that were colder than it was outside. That is the reality facing people, and I know people who fit into that category. This is the hardest winter that we have had for years. Older Members — looking around the Chamber, I suspect that one or two are older than me — could probably cast their minds back to harsher winters than I can remember.

The fuel poverty bracket has decreased, so we must be fair and put things in perspective. We acknowledge that there have been improvements, but there has not been a big enough uptake of the scheme. The fact that 153,000 people in Northern Ireland have to choose between heat and other essentials this winter represents a critical situation. The decrease in the fuel poverty bracket must not make us complacent. It is scary that 153,000 people in Northern Ireland fall into that category. This is not a Third World nation. We allegedly have one of the top 10 economies; therefore, we have a position to maintain.

Last week, I read in one of the papers about two average pensioners who, having paid for food, heating and the other bare essentials, were left with only £2 and 47p respectively to do them for the rest of the week. Those are the facts, and we need to do something better about them. It is not satisfactory to say that those people should take it on the chin. They cannot take it on the chin or in the pocket — they cannot take it at all.

Es Help the Aged hae pointed oot, when we tak' the rhetoric awa' aa thegither, the auld an' the seek an thaim at cannae waark ir maide tae chuse atween either no aitin ir pittin oan anither gansey an pair o' tichts an settin i the cauld. Hit's es simple es thon an thon bes scairesum! The thocht o' simboadie i Norlin Airlan deein oan account o' no havin eneuch heat can niver bae pit ap wi'.

As Help the Aged noted, when all the rhetoric is stripped away, elderly people and those who are ill or

unable to work are left with the choice of not eating a meal or putting on another jumper and pair of tights and sitting in the cold. It is that simple and that frightening. The thought of someone in Northern Ireland dying due to a lack of heating can never be tolerable.

I am aware of government schemes to help those receiving pensions or benefits with their heating bills. The Minister for Social Development must be congratulated on those efforts. However, it must also be considered that, since implementation six years ago, the amount of money available has stayed the same. That is despite the fact that, in only one year, the gas price alone has risen by 60%. Although I am no mathematician, I can see that the sums do not add up. The additional payments are helpful in extreme times, but more assistance is available, although people are not aware of it.

I pay tribute to my colleague Maurice Morrow for the work that he did when not out shooting or fishing. In establishing the warm homes scheme, he caught the biggest fish and shot the highest bird, and I thank him for that.

The warm homes scheme is aimed at people on a wide range of benefits, including income-based benefits. People who are in receipt of qualifying benefits are eligible for assistance in insulating their homes, with a grant of up to £850 available. In addition, some applicants may be eligible for the warm homes plus grant towards the conversion of a heating system. That grant may amount to some £4,300. The system does, therefore, provide various measures to help.

I must give due credit to the Bryson Charitable Group. The group became involved in the scheme in July 2009 and informed me that, between then and the end of December 2009, some 1,276 interventions had been made. The scheme aims for an efficiency gain of 15%, and the current average is 24.65%.

The scheme has produced clear benefits, but many more people need help, and such help must be encouraged. I ask the Minister to get the money and give it to the people who need it as soon as possible.

As I see a 1960s icon sitting on the Benches on the far side of the Chamber, I am reminded of a pop song from the 1960s, in which someone is knocking at the door but cannot get in. That applies to many people who are knocking on the door of the scheme but cannot get in. I ask the Minister to ensure that the thousands of pounds in the system are filtered out to those people.

A young couple in my constituency bought a home two years ago at the height of the market. As a result of the market prices at that time, their mortgage is more than £1,000 a month, but they do not qualify for the scheme.

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

Mr Shannon: We must help those who are under financial pressure. I ask the Minister to address that, as I am sure she will in her response to the debate.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate and thank my colleagues for tabling today's motion. Of all the recent schemes designed to assist those in most need in Northern Ireland, the warm homes scheme is one of the most popular to be introduced by the Assembly. Over the past few years, I have made countless referrals to the scheme on behalf of constituents. Many were delighted by the response and professionalism of the staff, as was the case when the scheme was run by Eaga plc. Ultimately, many of my constituents have a warmer home as a result.

The demand for the scheme is high and has remained so throughout its existence. One of the main concerns for me as a representative of a largely rural constituency is that the current scheme does not allow for the replacement of old and inefficient oil-fired burners. I have come across many constituents in the Newry and Armagh area who are having trouble with old boilers. However, when they enquire about a replacement, they are informed that new boilers are no longer being offered, despite the fact that many meet the criteria of the scheme.

The recent period of extremely cold weather was a source of concern to me. I knew that people who had raised concerns about the eligibility criteria and the lack of support for new oil-fired burners would be finding it difficult to heat their home. That is unfortunate, and I am interested in the reasoning behind the decision to axe new boilers from the current scheme.

12.15 pm

I share the concerns of my colleagues: the warm homes scheme is perhaps too narrow in its potential to reach those who experience real difficulty in heating their homes. I support any measure to widen the eligibility criteria.

I have another concern that is not related directly to the scheme but, nonetheless, is an important issue. I have come across situations in areas such as Tandragee in which Housing Executive tenants have Economy 7 as their only form of heating. In the opinion of those who are lumbered with it and in mine, Economy 7 is one of the most useless forms of heating imaginable. Given the Department's agenda on tackling fuel poverty, how does the continued use of Economy 7 sit with the Department's energy efficiency policies? Most of the constituents to whom I have spoken regarding that heating system are in receipt of benefits and simply cannot afford to pay the huge electricity tariffs to run the Economy 7 heaters.

The fact that the warm homes scheme is not open to Housing Executive tenants begs the question of why the Housing Executive is not directed by the

Department to refit homes with oil-fired or gas central heating. The warm homes scheme acknowledges that Economy 7 is insufficient. Why should Housing Executive tenants have to suffer that antique heating system winter after winter? I would be grateful if the Minister could respond to this important issue.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome this motion because it is helpful to discuss the warm homes scheme in its generality and to focus on some of the potential areas of difficulty. I congratulate the Minister on not resiling from the priorities that she set in relation to the expenditure of her Department. She said that she would prioritise newbuild in housing, which is important for the most vulnerable in our community. She also said that she would stick to a target and budget for supporting the most vulnerable people in our community. She saw the warm homes scheme and fuel poverty as priorities. She ring-fenced money in that regard: £27 million to address fuel poverty and £20 million to be spent on the warm homes scheme. That is an important contribution to helping people who are vulnerable. I congratulate her on not resiling from those priorities, which were important for the people who most need help from government.

I have listened carefully to the debate. Although Members are very supportive of the scheme and are very congratulatory towards the Minister, some concerns have been raised in about the replacement or repair of boilers. The Northern Ireland Audit Office conducted an investigation into the warm homes scheme. Its report, entitled 'Warm Homes: Tackling Fuel Poverty', made recommendations about the value-for-money aspects of the warm homes scheme. In particular, it focused on the replacement of boilers and said that the impact of the measures in relation to improving energy efficiency and alleviating fuel poverty was uncertain. It also said that, in 2006-07, more than £10 million was spent replacing and repairing 2,600 existing boilers. However, the Audit Office questioned that.

The Public Accounts Committee then endorsed that report. Acting on that, after public consultation, the Department reviewed its criteria. Indeed, I believe that the Social Development Committee endorsed the change in the criteria in January 2009. It may well be that some Members are now rethinking that position. If they are, that is fair enough in light of their experience.

I am certain that the Department's review of that aspect of the criteria will be earnest and conscientious and that it will change the criteria if there is a need to do so. However, the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Office said that that did not represent good value for money. Therefore, the Department was right to change the criteria.

I hope that the Department continues its good work in assisting people and creating warm homes for as many citizens as possible. I hope that the target of 9,000 can be reached and that the £20 million will be fully used in so doing. The residual aspect to the criteria is that replacements can be made where there is no heating system, Economy 7 or solid fuel. That is fair enough, because those are the most inefficient methods to warm homes, and, because they cost more, they impact most adversely on people. In the circumstances, what the Department has done and the Minister has authorised is reasonable.

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

Mr A Maginness: That is, of course, subject to a review at the end of this financial year.

Mr Craig: I support the motion. All Members agree that the warm homes scheme is one of the most beneficial schemes to have been introduced in Northern Ireland. It has been the main tool with which to tackle fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. For that reason, I congratulate Lord Morrow on his foresight in introducing the scheme during his tenure as Minister for Social Development.

Lord Morrow was not the scheme's only supporter. On 29 July 2009, the current Minister said:

"Since its introduction in 2001, over 70,000 homes across Northern Ireland have benefited from a range of measures which have significantly improved their energy efficiency."

The Minister continued:

"I want to do everything in my power to champion the rights of the vulnerable and those in poverty. I want to target resources in a way which has maximum impact within our communities."

I wholeheartedly agree with that statement and have no issue with it whatsoever.

The warm homes scheme was meant to target the most vulnerable people in our society. The recent cold snap was, allegedly, the worst in 30 years. Since I cannot remember 30 years ago, I do not honestly know; others have informed me that that is probably correct. *[Laughter.]*

In the north-west, the Society of St Vincent de Paul has spent £20,000 paying fuel bills for people who cannot afford them. The number of those helped through the warm homes scheme so far this year — some 2,000 — raises serious issues and concerns. It worries me because, in previous years, that figure was much higher. It sat at 11,000 for the past couple of years.

I believe that the drop is the result of a change in criteria that was agreed by the Committee for Social Development, as has been rightly pointed out. The change was agreed by the Committee because of concerns raised in a PAC report about abuse of the warm homes scheme. I recall that, at the time, I raised

my concerns about the interpretation of the PAC report. I felt that we were heading towards a system that was probably too restrictive. However, that said, I also made a point of speaking to the Comptroller and Auditor General about the matter, and his impression was that we were misinterpreting his report.

Although there will always be people who abuse a system and there will always be a need to tackle them, it is important that we do not throw the whole system out in an attempt to do so. In this instance, we have probably gone too far in restricting the ability of some people in Northern Ireland to apply to the warm homes scheme when they are in fuel poverty but not necessarily on benefits. Thousands of people here have very low incomes but, for whatever reason, fall outside the benefit mark. Nevertheless, they are still in fuel poverty, especially now, when fuel prices seem to be at an all-time high. That causes a lot of people to fall into the fuel poverty trap. All I want is fairness and equality built into the scheme. Therefore, it is important that we review its restrictions and perhaps open them up.

The UK press highlighted another issue, and the Prime Minister subsequently introduced a boiler scrappage scheme, which has proved beneficial. Let us look at such innovative ideas.

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

Mr Craig: The Minister should look at such ideas, no matter where they come from. Let us not fall into the trap of having a massive underspend in the Department for Social Development. Given the present financial climate, that money will disappear from the Department's budget.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately on the lunchtime suspension. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the debate will resume with the Minister for Social Development's response.

The sitting was suspended at 12.27 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development for bringing the motion to the Assembly, and I thank the Members who contributed to the debate. The recent spell of extremely cold weather makes it an appropriate time to discuss how we can help to keep homes warmer now and in the future. The debate gives me the opportunity to clarify some of the issues that were raised, and I will try to deal with all Members' concerns. I assure Members that I will read the Hansard report, and, if I have left any question unanswered, I will write directly to the Member concerned.

The motion recognises the value of the warm homes scheme and its valuable contribution to tackling fuel poverty and improving energy efficiency in homes. The motion questions the eligibility criteria specifically in relation to heating replacements. I will give Members a brief background to the context of the warm homes scheme and the rationale behind the changes that were introduced to the scheme in July 2009.

In 2004, the Department for Social Development published its 'Ending Fuel Poverty: A Strategy for Northern Ireland', which set out the Government's fuel poverty targets and how they intended to meet them. In the 2004 strategy, the Department set out its vision for the future as:

"one of homes that are free from cold and damp, of homes in which people enjoy living, that are healthy and enhance the quality of their occupants' lives. Our vision is of a society in which people live in a warm, comfortable home and need not worry about the effect of the cold on their health."

As Minister for Social Development, I fully support that vision and have made the alleviation of fuel poverty one of my priorities. Reminding ourselves of that vision has probably never been timelier, following the coldest spell in 30 years.

The warm homes scheme has been my Department's flagship scheme for the alleviation of fuel poverty since its inception in 2001. By March 2010, the scheme will have made almost 80,000 privately owned and privately rented homes in Northern Ireland warmer, with an investment of almost £130 million. In June 2008, the Northern Ireland Audit Office report, 'Warm Homes: Tackling fuel poverty', made recommendations about the value for money aspects of the warm homes scheme. The Audit Office reported that, in 2006-07, the Department spent more than £10 million replacing and repairing 2,637 central heating boilers that were old and no longer efficient. The Audit Office said that the impact of those measures in improving energy efficiency and alleviating fuel poverty was uncertain. At an average cost of £3,809, the value for money of

those measures was questioned. My Department agreed with the recommendation, and, following public consultation on proposed changes to the warm homes scheme, repairs and upgrades to heating systems were removed from the scheme. The Public Accounts Committee also endorsed the Audit Office recommendation on repairs and upgrades of heating systems. The Committee for Social Development endorsed the Public Accounts Committee's recommendations at its meeting on 15 January 2009, and the new criteria were also subject to public consultation.

Following a procurement exercise, two new warm homes scheme managers, H&A Mechanical Services Limited and Bryson Charitable Group, were appointed, and the new scheme came into operation on 1 July 2009. I set the scheme managers a challenging target to improve the energy efficiency of 9,000 homes by 31 March 2010, and I am delighted to say that, despite only starting to operate on 1 July 2009, the scheme managers remain on track to meet that target. The removal of repairs and upgrades has enabled my Department to open up the heating element of the scheme to families on working tax credit for the first time.

Research has shown that there are long-term health benefits for children who live in warm homes. My Department is now focusing the scheme on households that have the lowest incomes and the most energy-inefficient homes. Those are some of the very issues that Members raised. Households that have the lowest incomes are those that are in receipt of income-related benefits and working tax credits.

I believe that the limited available resources must be targeted to the most energy-inefficient homes; that is, those that have no central heating, solid fuel heating, Economy 7 or liquefied petroleum gas. The house condition survey 2006 indicated that, given that there are thousands of such properties in Northern Ireland, the Department must concentrate on providing them with heating systems. I must point out that a boiler can be replaced under the warm homes scheme in exceptional circumstances in which there is significant danger to the health and safety of the house's occupants. That decision is at the discretion of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, as contract administrator,

I hope that that provides some assurance on concerns that have been expressed about that issue. However, other concerns have been expressed about the removal, repair and upgrade of heating systems under the warm homes scheme. Heating systems are one element of improving homes' energy efficiency.

I will take this opportunity to highlight the importance of improving the insulation of the housing stock. Insulation plays a key role in improving homes' energy efficiency. According to the Energy Saving Trust, a

typical home loses around half of its heat through the walls and loft.

The warm homes scheme offers insulation to people who receive disability benefits and to those who receive income-related benefits. There is no better time than during the current cold weather to make homes more energy-efficient by installing or improving insulation. We must not underestimate the value of insulation. It is estimated that such action can save householders an average of £300 each year. I ask Members to encourage their constituents to apply for assistance with insulation from the warm homes scheme. They will certainly feel the benefits in the warmth in their home.

The resources that I have allocated to fuel poverty interventions will ensure that the matter continues to be tackled and that many thousands of households have improved insulation and warmth, creating a more comfortable living environment. I assure Members that my Department will review the warm homes scheme after it has been operational for a year to ensure that it meets objectives.

I want to touch on other issues that were mentioned. Anna Lo and Mickey Brady, among others, mentioned the boiler scrappage scheme. Simon Hamilton, Anna Lo and Billy Armstrong mentioned the narrowing of the warm homes scheme's criteria. Mickey Brady also referred to the time that is taken by the procurement process. I must point out that the Department has made significant improvements in value for money as a result of that new procurement process. Tom Elliott raised issues about what the new scheme covers.

The boiler scrappage scheme was introduced in England, not as a fuel poverty scheme but as a scheme to assist with the carbon reduction target. It operates on a first-come, first-served basis. The scheme was not extended to Northern Ireland, and, naturally, I am disappointed by that. However, I intend to consider the introduction of such a scheme as part of my new fuel poverty strategy, which will be targeted at vulnerable people. I will consult on that in early spring 2010.

William Irwin raised the issue of the warm homes scheme and fuel poverty interventions in the social housing sector. They aim to assist vulnerable households by making homes less inefficient and by ensuring that less costly heating systems are installed. To date, almost 3,000 households in both the private and social sectors have made changes to their heating systems to improve efficiency and effectiveness and to ensure a reduction in household energy costs.

Much reference has been made to the budget. Some speakers are, patently, getting it wrong when they refer to possible underspend. Out of my £27 million budget for fuel poverty, I allocated £20 million to the warm homes scheme to help 9,000 households under the new criteria, and it looks as if we will be able to achieve the

target of 9,000 that was set out in the Programme for Government for less than £20 million. Simon Hamilton should be congratulating the Department. We will have more money to spend on other fuel poverty headings. Nobody should be in any doubt: we will spend our full fuel poverty budget.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister for Social Development: I am on a roll; let me finish. If people are trying to suggest that we will hand back unspent money from our fuel poverty budget line, they could not be more wrong. If people are suggesting that the budget has not been well managed, they could not be more wrong. Where did they get those details from? If the proposers of the motion are trying to say that we should not have changed the criteria for the warm homes scheme, as supported by the Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee, they should have said so at the time. Did they say so? No; not a word was uttered. If they want to distance themselves from the revised scheme, they are distancing themselves from the Committee for Social Development, which supported the changes.

The proposers of the motion, particularly Simon Hamilton, will know that, from the outset, the positions of Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development have been held by Members from his party. However, over the lunch break he had the brass neck to issue a press statement saying that the warm homes scheme is a mess. How is meeting one's target a mess? It is disappointing that Mr Hamilton proposes a motion merely to create for himself a platform from which to make a few cheap shots in the media. However, of course, he is a Strangford DUP representative.

Mr Hamilton: What does that mean? You are a disgrace.

The Minister for Social Development: However and for all that, we should, when changing any scheme, evaluate the impact of those changes, and that is what we will do in the case of the warm homes scheme, and I have given that assurance to the House.

Mr Hamilton: That was unbelievable. That was a disgrace, Margaret. You should be ashamed of yourself.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr David Hilditch to conclude and make a winding-up speech.

Mr Hilditch: I think that the Minister is wound-up enough. I welcome today's motion, and I thank the Minister, her predecessors and the Department for the work that has been done on the warm homes scheme. The fact that the Department has made 71,000 households warmer since 2001 is a commendable achievement. I also thank the Minister for her response and for providing for the newer Members background

to some of the schemes and outlining the situation regarding the working tax credits.

Although I welcome the upcoming 12-month review, it is imperative that we look at the wording of the motion and consider that we are looking at a potential underspend in this financial year, particularly in the heating system arena.

Today's debate has been good; in fact, it has been one of the better debates in recent times. Sixteen Members contributed to the debate. However, there is no doubt that success has slowed down in the eyes of many of those who contributed. The application process could be improved, as many people who are claiming benefits no longer meet the criteria to qualify for the scheme. Many people have lost out in the scheme in the changeover process, and some people who might be considered as borderline cases are missing out as the criteria have changed.

I want to look at the basic application process. We are aware that many elderly people, in particular, are not eligible to apply to the scheme, as they are living with family members and are not homeowners. However, what happens if an elderly person can no longer live on his or her own and moves in with a family member who is willing to look after them? I have been dealing with one scenario in east Antrim, in which it has come to light that one low-income family is caring for the 90-year-old mother of one of its members. That family has been refused the scheme. The lady moved in with her son, because she could no longer cope with living on her own. She moved out of her Housing Executive bungalow just over a year ago. She is on all the qualifying benefits, but the property is not eligible for the scheme, because the woman does not own the house in which she resides. The house is cold and in a bad state of repair, and the family cannot afford to do the necessary work. The fact that she is no longer able to look after herself and has moved in with family highlights that there are low-income families in our communities who fall just outside the eligibility criteria that would allow them to avail themselves of the scheme.

Countless low-income families have elderly relatives living with them, and those relatives are saving the Government money. In those situations, it appears that low-income families are being penalised for caring for their elderly relatives. They are willing to look after them and let them move into their home, yet those families are not able to avail themselves of the warm homes scheme. If that pensioner had rented a property elsewhere, she would have been eligible to apply for the scheme. The Department is not tackling the fuel poverty issue in that case; it is overlooking the vulnerable, and the Government are taking advantage of relatives who are willing to look after their loved ones.

2.15 pm

The Minister has told us that she wants to target resources so that they will have the maximum impact on communities. We should then consider all the private landlords who are eligible to qualify for the scheme. Many of their tenants are on benefits, and some may have never wanted to work, yet they are availing themselves of the scheme. On the other hand, people on low incomes who have worked all their life and have never claimed benefits are not entitled to any heating upgrades. Surely there should be some form of means-testing landlords who are entitled to use the scheme — a scheme that increases the value of their properties.

If fuel poverty is a function of three distinct features — household income, energy prices and energy efficiency — why are we not assessing the income of private landlords? If only the tenant's income is assessed, what happens when a tenant moves to another rented property owned by another landlord? Landlords keep gaining from the scheme.

Sadly, the elimination of fuel poverty in vulnerable households by 2010 now appears impossible, although the Department has estimated that, without the warm homes scheme, 53% of households would be in fuel poverty. To date, only 303 heating installations have occurred out of a total of 2,111. It is doubtful whether the scheme will achieve its target of 10,000 interventions. It would be humiliating for the Department to have one in three households in poverty when it has a budget of between £17 million and £18 million to spend. The Department must look at ways in which it can extend the criteria to include people who have oil and gas boilers.

I have heard nothing but good reports about the work of the new contractors who took on the scheme in July. I have heard that they are able to install a new heating system in a day with no mess, no fuss and no complications for the customer. With that in mind, we must allow them to continue to reduce fuel poverty. People do not want to spend another winter with inadequate heating. Why should they, if we still have money to spend?

We have had one of the coldest winters in 30 years. In addition to the winter fuel allowance, we have paid over £4 million to 166,000 qualifying households as a cold weather payment to help pensioners and those on low incomes to pay for their heating during the cold spell. The warm homes scheme should be supplemented by those allowances. There must be households that are claiming those allowances that could benefit from the warm homes scheme.

Last week, the Social Development Committee met the contractors responsible for the scheme to discuss various aspects of the current programme. As elected

representatives, we found the meeting helpful in gaining an understanding of the situation. We want to encourage as many people as possible to apply, as the warm homes scheme can improve their quality of life. However, it is frustrating when applicants with oil central heating do not meet the basic criteria and can no longer apply. Vulnerable people in our constituencies are being penalised.

Mr Craig: Does the Member agree that there are concerns among those who benefit from the scheme that there was an implication that, because of a PAC report, the scheme had been changed in such a way as to block some individuals from applying? As a fellow member of the Public Accounts Committee, he may remember that I raised that matter in the Committee and that a debate took place on the issue. The Committee was concerned that it was being blamed for the lack of delivery on the warm homes scheme.

Mr Hilditch: I concur with the Member's comments. I know that the Minister has lent heavily on those issues today, but there appears to be some misinterpretation of what was meant at that time.

Despite the frustration of elected representatives, we continue to play an important role in trying to promote the warm homes scheme. I am aware that a number of MLAs have been responsible for holding meetings throughout the Province. In my constituency, we have set up three such meetings in February — in Newtownabbey, Larne and Carrickfergus — to promote the uptake of the scheme in a traditionally low-uptake area, which highlights the enthusiasm that Members have for this very beneficial scheme.

Therefore, I urge the Minister and her Department to consider widening the application criteria to include those on low incomes and those with oil heating. I also urge her to use the remaining money in her budget that has been allocated to this worthwhile cause, as it presents an opportunity to change vulnerable lives.

I will now move on to some of the comments made by Members during the debate. In proposing the motion, Simon Hamilton gave a very good description of the situation on the ground. He was also quite complimentary towards the scheme, which he described as the number one scheme in the fight against fuel poverty. He gave us quite a few figures on where the scheme stands as we approach the end of the financial year and said that it would be criminal to have an underspend in that sector during one of the worst winters that we have had for some time. Finally, he called for a review of the criteria of the scheme and for changes to be made.

Mickey Brady said that the jury was still out on the contracting situation and the Department's decision to create two areas. He commented that many had been left out in the cold as a result of the new criteria,

highlighted a series of figures and asked the Minister to consider introducing a boiler scrappage scheme.

Tom Elliott felt that we were reaping the full benefits of the scheme and highlighted its benefit to the rural community in particular. He also highlighted the lack of availability of a heating upgrade.

Thomas Burns enthusiastically welcomed the warm homes scheme and acknowledged the wording of the motion. He praised everyone involved but avoided the issue of a potential underspend when pushed on it by Mr Hamilton.

Anna Lo also expressed concern at the underspend. She highlighted the higher cost of heating homes in Northern Ireland compared to mainland UK and the low number of people who have qualified for the new scheme.

Alex Easton said that much had been done but more needed to be done. He called for constant monitoring of the scheme and spoke about its health benefits.

Following the trend of most Members, Claire McGill supported the motion and spoke about its value. She also fought the corner of the rural community and some supplementary work that has been carried out by DARD.

George Robinson congratulated our former Minister Lord Morrow, who implemented the scheme in the first instance. He also highlighted the need for a boiler scrappage scheme to be introduced in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr Hilditch: Mr Armstrong questioned the targets that could be achieved, and a series of Members highlighted the issues that I have touched on in the last few minutes.

I have no problem in pressing the motion at this stage.

Mrs M Bradley: On a point of information, Mr Deputy Speaker. Was it unparliamentary for a Member to have pointed his finger at the Minister and told her that she was a disgrace?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I must put the Question first.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the valuable contribution of the warm homes scheme, since its inception, in improving the energy and fuel efficiency of thousands of homes, and in tackling fuel poverty in Northern Ireland; welcomes the allocation of over £20 million to the scheme in this financial year; notes with concern the low levels of heating installations this year to date; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to examine the progress of the scheme and to review the eligibility criteria with a view to making them more flexible in respect of heating replacements while still focusing on people most in need.

Mrs M Bradley: On a point of information, Mr Deputy Speaker. Was it unparliamentary for the Member for Strangford to have pointed his finger at the Minister and told her that she was a disgrace?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will refer the matter to the Speaker, who will have an opportunity to check the recording. I must move on.

Mr Hamilton: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In reviewing the Minister's contribution, will the Deputy Speaker also draw the Speaker's attention to the remarks that the Minister for Social Development made about me?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has continually asked Members to show courtesy to other Members. Mrs Bradley's remarks have been noted.

Mr Hamilton: What about my remarks?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your remarks have been noted as well.

Mr Spratt: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, you said that the remarks have been "noted". Are you reporting those remarks to the Speaker and asking him to have a look at them? I do not quite understand what "noted" means in relation to the instruction that you have given to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am glad of the opportunity to clarify that. The Speaker will review what has happened in the Chamber this afternoon and will report back to the Assembly. Is that clear?

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Landlord Registration

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 A Maskey: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the efforts currently being made by the Minister for Employment and Learning to address the ongoing issues related to the Holylands area of south Belfast; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to introduce mandatory landlord registration, as landlord registration has been identified by stakeholders as a necessary step in addressing these issues.

The motion is self-explanatory, in that it calls for the introduction of a mandatory landlord registration process. I have been very disappointed over a number of years — I know that other Members feel likewise — that, until now, no Minister has been prepared to take the decision to introduce such a registration scheme, despite all the evidence that has been accrued over recent years and the fact that most, if not all, stakeholders who have replied to various surveys and consultations also adopt the position that such a mandatory scheme would be very helpful. For example, a number of local councils have been very supportive of the idea of a compulsory landlord registration scheme because they believe that it would automatically help with the enforcement of policies and practices.

I know that Members must always comply with the code of conduct relating to the Register of Members' Interests, but, in order to dispel any notion otherwise, I would like Members who speak in the debate to indicate whether they are landlords or have an interest in any property that has been rented to someone else to live in.

Over the past number of years, I have worked as an elected representative in South Belfast on this difficult issue, as have many others. People assume that the problem affects the Holylands alone, but, unfortunately, it has extended well beyond that area. As part of my duties, I have worked with a number of landlords. Quite a few of those landlords — in particular, some of the larger portfolio holders — have been extremely professional. I therefore fail to see why some of those individuals would have anything to fear from a mandatory registration scheme. It is my understanding that they are fully transparent, open and above board, as is all the work that they do. They are big business-people in the community and attend almost every meeting that I know of that is convened to discuss the matter. For the most part, their work is extremely professional and well done. I do not see why those

who fall into that category would argue that they have anything to worry about from a compulsory registration process, because they are complying more than well with all the rules and regulations. The mandatory registration scheme would not be directed at those individuals.

At the other end of the spectrum are many people — individual families, for example — who may have bought a property as an investment. I know of families who decided to invest and buy property because the son or daughter was travelling into Belfast to attend university, and siblings may have planned to do the same later. Some of those people, whom I would call single-family landlords, carry out their duties and responsibilities as landlords in the utmost professional manner. Again, I argue that none of those individuals has anything to fear from a compulsory registration scheme. Their record as landlords in dealing with any complaints about their property demonstrates their 100% integrity.

2.30 pm

Unfortunately, however, a number of landlords are not as professional and may be quite unscrupulous. Although people often characterise the issue as centring on the Holylands and students, the problem extends way beyond that area and way beyond the tenure of students. In calling for a compulsory registration scheme, I do so not only for the Holylands, and I am not looking at how the issue impacts on students only. A compulsory registration scheme is eminently sensible, and evidence will prove that it is needed and that it would bring a clear benefit for all. It would enhance the rights of tenants, and it should also enhance the obligations of tenants, and, equally, of landlords.

The issue is about the rights and responsibilities of both sides. As some of my colleagues will mention later, in areas such as the Holylands, which characterises the debate, people often have complaints against people who have been staying in rented accommodation. The people who wish to make a complaint and the councils, which have enforcement obligations, sometimes find it difficult to track down and establish who the owners of the property are, because the properties are let through agents or, sometimes, almost unofficially.

That has led to substantial difficulties with ensuring not only that people who rent accommodation behave in a way that reflects their responsibility to their neighbours, but that those people have their rights and entitlements protected and enshrined. We know that many complaints have been made over the years by people who rent accommodation and who say that it is almost guaranteed that they will not get their deposit back because an excuse to withhold it will be proffered. Sometimes, landlords have a legitimate

reason for doing that, but people often say that they view a deposit as a lost amount of money.

The difficulties in the Holylands have sparked greater interest in this issue and have been an example of how an unregulated mix of tenure and an unregulated system with, for example, the flaw of having no registration process for landlords, can result in an area going downhill to such an extent that the area is deemed to be, or is in danger of being, in crisis.

As an elected representative for South Belfast, I have met all the relevant stakeholders in the past few years. I have met a number of Ministers, including those responsible for the Department for Social Development (DSD), planning and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), particularly in recent times, when interest in the matter has increased. I appreciate the fact that Minister Reg Empey has taken the interest to convene a stakeholders' forum. The stakeholders' forum has sought to put some attention on the matter, but, as the Minister acknowledges in his latest report and has said publicly and privately, that approach has fundamental difficulties. He understands that the difficulties faced in that area are not being fully addressed by the relevant authorities.

I do not suggest for one second that a compulsory registration scheme for landlords would in itself resolve the issues in an area such as the Holylands, but it would be an essential element in resolving those issues. In Scotland, for example, such a scheme has operated in recent years. That scheme has brought a number of additional landlords on to the public registration scheme. As I said, that allows for much greater enforcement of the management of such properties, which is in the long-term public interest.

The difficulties and costs that would be associated with such a scheme have been mentioned, such as difficulties with the IT system. However, those are systemic problems, they are not fundamental to the scheme, and no one in Scotland argues that the scheme there should be abolished because of those problems.

It is very important that a mandatory registration scheme be introduced. I am disappointed that, year after year and Minister after Minister, reasons keep being given for the matter being considered further or for the scheme not being introduced.

There is no reason why landlords who are transparent in their work, professional in their conduct, and whose integrity is beyond question should have any cause for concern about a compulsory registration scheme. However, there are other less scrupulous landlords, and they prove the point that there is a need for such a scheme that would form part of an overall solution for areas such as the Holylands, as well as other areas such as Ballynafeigh, Stranmillis, the lower Ormeau Road

and the Lisburn Road. I could provide a list of areas that have been similarly affected.

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

Mr A Maskey: I commend the motion to the House, and I look forward to hearing from my colleagues.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton): I will initially speak as Chairperson of the Committee. Fortunately, or maybe unfortunately, I cannot declare an interest as a landlord. The Committee has not considered the specific issue of the Holylands in south Belfast, but we have, on a number of occasions, considered a range of issues around mandatory or voluntary registration of landlords in the private rented sector. I wish to advise the House of some of the context of those deliberations to inform the wider views that may relate to the debate.

The House knows that many people with limited experience of private rented tenancy now find themselves as unwilling tenants or new landlords. Recent evidence provided to the Committee shows that many of those new landlords may have just one or two properties, which are being offered for rent in the short to medium term. Owing to the depression in the housing market, they are often unable to liquidate what would have been considered a speculative property purchase. They must, therefore, try to meet mortgage payments by offering their property for rent.

It is also the case that the decline in the availability of mortgage credit has forced many would-be homeowners to defer purchases and remain in the private rented sector. According to the Department's figures, the private rented sector in Northern Ireland in 2007-08 amounted to something like 14% of all tenures. That figure is probably growing, and would, of course, be much higher in places such as the Holylands.

The Committee received evidence of confusion among private rented sector tenants and landlords about their roles. Consequently, most stakeholders would welcome the provision of better information for tenants and landlords about their rights and responsibilities, and even a landlord accreditation system, which would promote best practice in that important housing sector.

The Committee, as part of its pre-legislative review of the Housing (Amendment) Bill, also received evidence from stakeholders about alleged serious overcrowding in parts of south Belfast, and certain other excesses in the private rented sector. The Committee believes that the private rented sector has a vital role to play in meeting housing need, and that unacceptable practices such as serious overcrowding or unfitness should be rooted out.

The Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 was designed:

"To target unfitness and disrepair through repair enforcement and rent control; to reduce inequities between tenure types; to simplify, clarify and raise awareness of landlord and tenant obligations."

Evidence presented to the Committee suggests that basic requirements such as the need for a statement of tenancy terms and a rent book are not being enforced, and that other measures, such as certificates of fitness, can be hard to impose.

The Committee agrees that the Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 has not worked as planned, and that something new is required. Consequently, the Committee waits expectantly for the Minister's next housing Bill. It has been suggested, however, that a first step in improving the situation could be the gathering of information to profile the private rented sector accurately, and to answer basic questions on who the landlords are, how many there are, and what are the needs of their tenants.

Although all members of the Committee favour some form of registration for landlords as a means of gathering information and as a platform for providing training and help for landlords, a number of members have signalled their opposition to a mandatory registration system. It has been argued that, as in Scotland, a mandatory system could be expensive, may capture information on only co-operative, law-abiding landlords, and, therefore, may not lead to an enhancement of the private rented sector and the elimination of undesirable practices. The issue of landlord registration is complex, and will undoubtedly be subject to further Committee deliberation. I wait with particular interest the Minister's comments on the form of landlord registration to be provided for in the next housing Bill.

I shall make some comments not as Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, but as a Strangford DUP Assembly Member. We all recognise the importance of the private rented sector, and would wish to place on record that, rather than seeming to tarnish every private landlord, there are a great many very good landlords in the private rented sector. Like anything, however, it is the few bad apples that ruin the barrel.

It is an important sector, and it is growing in importance with respect to tackling homelessness. The sector is important for many who are on the social housing waiting list, and it has many tenants who are in receipt of housing benefit. It provides an essential service that we could not do without.

In principle, I support mandatory registration, with some caveats and qualifications. We need to see the cost and nature of any registration scheme, and to know what information will be required of landlords and on whom the onus will be to register.

Consider examples from elsewhere. In Scotland, it was very costly; it cost £5.2 million and there were IT problems. There was a focus on registration, but not on improving tenancy management, and no comprehensive evaluation has been carried out. Similarly, in the Republic of Ireland, a similar scheme has had a huge annual budget, massive legal costs and enormous IT costs, and it has concentrated on enforcement, rather than on improving overall standards. In Northern Ireland, the registration of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) has had problems: so, even here, we have not had a good experience.

Allowing for those caveats and qualifications, we must have an effective scheme. We should all support the idea of getting at least some form of accreditation and registration system for private landlords.

Mr Armstrong: I support the motion. The Ulster Unionist Party is not a supporter of big government and the red tape that, all too often, comes with it. We believe that a light touch in regulation is best, but we are prepared for government to step in when there is a problem.

As all Members are aware, there is a shortage of social housing in Northern Ireland and that, as a result, the private rented sector plays a crucial role in meeting demand. Amid the ongoing recession, it is unrealistic to expect the Social Development Minister to produce a house-building programme of the scale required to supply public sector housing to everyone who requests it. It is no surprise, therefore, that recent data shows that some 11% of Northern Ireland housing stock is privately rented.

The statistics also show that a significant number of those who live in the private rented sector could be described as living in vulnerable households, with many in fuel poverty and in houses that are poorly maintained. However, in 2006, 27% of private rented dwellings failed to meet the decent homes standard, and, in the past five years, the number of households presenting as homeless to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive due to the loss of rented accommodation increased by 50%. It is crucial that such people are protected by legislation from the minority of rogue and complacent landlords. It is unfortunate that a minority of tenants may be described as "bad tenants". There is also a minority of landlords who do not live up to their responsibilities, and regulation is therefore required to hold them to account.

Clearly, the concentration of so many private landlords who own HMOs in such a compact area has created difficulties for local communities and long-standing residents. The requirement that HMOs be registered is a part of the jigsaw which forms the solution to the problem. Input is also required from the

universities, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Department for Employment and Learning.

The Ulster Unionist Party wants to see everyone, landlords and tenants, living up to their respective responsibilities. If landlords abide by sensible regulations, then the quality of life for tenants and nearby residents will be improved. The key word is "sensible". The last thing we want to do is to stifle business, but, equally, we cannot stand idly by and watch unscrupulous landlords take advantage of tenants or local residents and gain unfair economic advantages over the vast majority of landlords.

Mr Burns: I support the motion. I must declare an interest: I am a landlord. I have one house that was left to me by my father and which was our family's home. That is the only house that I rent out.

I wish to say a few words on the landlord registration scheme. I will not dwell on the specifics of the antisocial behaviour that has been occurring in the Holylands; other Members have already mentioned it. However, I commend the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister for Social Development for their efforts to resolve those issues, particularly by engagement with the residents, the universities, Belfast City Council and the PSNI. The problem needs to be brought under control, and the Minister for Social Development and her Department are making every effort to do that.

2.45 pm

The Holylands area has, undoubtedly, been given a bad name in recent years. It appears to have been totally taken over by students. Indeed, there are some streets on which all the houses appear to be student houses. The increase in the number of people going to university has probably played a part in that growing trend. However, it is not only students who live there but immigrant families and workers, young professionals, benefit claimants, and long-term residents. To say that there is friction among those groups in the local community is an understatement.

Most Members agree that houses in multiple occupation are the main source of the problem. I am in favour of a mandatory register of landlords who own that type of house. I recognise that a tough registration scheme will have a positive impact on the Holylands area, but we have heard in previous debates that a full scheme would be expensive to roll out and would take a lot of time. If we cannot get the full system in place quickly, some sort of university-led approach to student housing will be needed. An approved landlord scheme operates in other cities, such as Leeds, Liverpool and Nottingham. In order to be approved, landlords must follow a code of practice that encourages them to live up to high standards, and that is better for them, for their tenants and for the wider neighbourhood.

However, any scheme for the registration of landlords in student areas should be about more than just registration. Landlords must be held responsible, to a certain degree, for the behaviour of their tenants. They must select tenants in a better way and deal with problem tenants. It is not simply about evicting bad tenants, because that will not solve the problem, as they will just move elsewhere or to another house in the same street. Landlords need to play a greater role in managing disputes and reporting issues to the authorities. Landlords must be educated, helped and encouraged to engage with the police and community wardens, and they must help to build a better neighbourhood.

Ultimately, the Assembly and Belfast City Council must take the lead in creating better neighbourhoods. We have a responsibility to meet the housing needs of all members of society, and we cannot ignore the wider issue of demand for student housing. The increasing number of students in higher education requires an increase in purpose-built student accommodation, and we must promote other areas in Belfast as good areas in which students can live.

In conclusion, I restate my support for the introduction of a landlord registration scheme, and I urge the Minister for Social Development to do her utmost to take that forward. However, that scheme alone will not sort out the problems in the Holylands area; it is only one part of the answer.

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

Mr Burns: A complex set of problems exists that will not be resolved by one simple initiative.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Burns: However, better and more professional landlords will make a significant contribution to sorting out the problem.

Ms Lo: Although it is commendable that the Minister for Employment and Learning has provided political leadership in co-ordinating efforts to address the problem of antisocial behaviour in the Holylands area as a direct response to the St Patrick's Day riot last year, it is important to recognise that a number of agencies, such as Belfast City Council, the PSNI, the two universities, the student union and local residents' groups, have been active in tackling the issue over the years. Indeed, for some time, many stakeholders have been calling for a landlord registration scheme to improve landlord management practice.

The private rented sector has expanded and, given the long social housing waiting list of over 40,000 applicants, it will continue to do so. Moreover, because of the difficulties in getting mortgages, many young people are renting flats instead of buying their own

homes, and the transient population of migrant workers and students will always seek rented accommodation. One only has to look at the streets in south Belfast to see that some are mostly made up of letting properties.

There are, of course, many good landlords, but, as an MLA, I frequently hear complaints from my constituents about unscrupulous landlords who do not maintain their properties or who have disputes with tenants over tenancy agreements or the return of deposits.

In the public housing sector, the Housing Executive is responsible for the provision of decent homes and their maintenance, and it is governed by rules and regulations. The private rented sector receives £1.4 million a year from housing benefits. Therefore, why is it not accountable for good management practices and fitness standards?

It is disappointing that DSD's recent consultation paper on a strategy for the private rented sector did not favour a mandatory registration scheme, because of its concerns around cost. The paper only suggests a voluntary accreditation scheme, which, in my view, would be a half-hearted attempt to tackle the issue. As the Rugg review in England found, the reality is that:

"landlords do not take up voluntary training and support in any great numbers, vulnerable tenants continue to be exploited by unscrupulous landlords and 'amateur' landlords continue to do business in ignorance of their obligations."

The Department of Communities and Local Government is going to consult on proposals to introduce a light-touch national register for private landlords in England and Wales, stating that it regards such a register as:

"vital to the professionalisation of the sector."

The mandatory schemes in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland may have deficiencies and inadequacies, such as being costly to set up or having IT problems. However, by and large, those schemes have shown that, in the end, the system will work in regulating the sector. Are we content to be the only region in the UK and on the island of Ireland without a register to weed out bad letting practices? The Housing Rights Service highly recommends mandatory registration, and it maintains that a register would make it much easier for councils and tenants to make contact with landlords when problems arise.

I very much support the motion, and I believe that a light-touch register, without the burden of too much bureaucracy, would be good for the private rented sector and for Northern Ireland. Such a register would protect landlords and tenants.

It is essential that we have a foundation framework so that we know who owns what. From that, data can be used to create a system that provides training where necessary, provides support —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should bring her remarks to a close.

Ms Lo: If landlords do not keep up with the code of standards —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Lo: If landlords do not keep up with the code of standards, they can be deregistered, and they cannot let their premises without being registered again.

Mr Hilditch: I welcome this topical debate.

Registering landlords will go some way to protecting them and their properties. Given what has happened in the Holylands area of Belfast in the past, there is no doubt that landlords and tenants need protecting. In particular, we are told that landlord registration has been identified by stakeholders as a necessary step in addressing those issues.

We are unable to get an exact figure of how many landlords there are, but we know that they provide homes for many people. The role of landlords in providing social housing is not to be underestimated. If the private rental sector did not exist, our social housing stock would collapse, and many of the vulnerable in our communities would be homeless.

Students need to take responsibility for their actions. They need to know that some of their behaviour has been totally unacceptable. Causing damage to property is a criminal offence. If students were vandalising public property on the street, they would be charged, so it is nonsensical that there is limited legislation to prevent them from damaging private property. Students should have obligations as tenants.

I congratulate the Minister for Employment and Learning for the work that he has done on the action plan for the Holylands. That plan will help to protect all those who live in the area. Policing the area will make it safer, and monitoring the students' behaviour will give them awareness of their responsibilities. Designing a code of practice for bars on alcohol promotion and sensible drinking will help to reduce binge drinking. The existence of a Holylands management committee that is made up of local representatives, members of Belfast City Council, landlords and students will mean that local issues can be discussed and resolved by those who have the necessary local knowledge and experience.

If the Minister brings forward her proposals on the registration of landlords, some of the weaknesses in the private rented sector will be addressed. It will also mean the alleviation of the problems that were experienced previously in the Holylands and other areas that have houses in multiple occupancy that are rented by students and migrant workers in particular. HMOs have many negative impacts on our communities. If they are allowed to go unregulated or fall foul of

legislation that does not work, there can be detrimental effects on an area socially, environmentally, physically and economically.

Previously, we supported mandatory registration for landlords. If the examples in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland that Mr Hamilton and Ms Lo outlined are anything to go by, the implementation of the measure will, in practice, be costly and imperfect. Therefore, much work needs to be done and explored to get it right. Although I support the motion, I am mindful of the costs, resources and time that it will take to implement mandatory registration.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 3.00 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Ms Martina Anderson.

The debate stood suspended.

3.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Irish Football Association

1. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide an update on the review of the Irish Football Association's structures and finances.

(AQO 604/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McCausland): As part of the implementation of the governance and administration component of the soccer strategy, Sport Northern Ireland commissioned a number of reviews of the structures and finances of the Irish Football Association (IFA). In response to those reviews, the IFA carried out a range of reforms to its structures and finances, including a merger of the IFA and the Irish Football League; the establishment of a new 11-member executive board; the appointment through open competition of independent members to the board; the recruitment by open competition of a chief executive with relevant business acumen; and an overhaul of financial systems and controls to provide greater levels of accountability and transparency.

As a result of those and other reforms that have been carried out under the soccer strategy, the IFA has moved football from a position in 2005 where, because of a range of management deficiencies, it was not possible to invest any public money in the game to a position where money can be made available on a limited assurance basis. Those reforms have enabled the IFA to implement a number of other soccer strategy-related initiatives, including the development of youth football and improvements to playing facilities.

I have already publicly stated that I believe that the improvements to the governance of football, which began under the soccer strategy, need to continue and to be accelerated. Those improvements are founded on the principles of leadership, accountability, transparency and openness to scrutiny and were enunciated under the soccer strategy. The principles apply equally to all publicly funded sports governing bodies, not only to football.

Mr Lunn: I welcome the various improvements that the Minister outlined. Is any money being withheld from the IFA pending further improvements?

Moreover, will the Minister confirm that no public money has been used to subsidise the payment to Howard Wells?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I will deal with those questions in reverse order. My Department provides grant-in-aid to Sport NI to help it support the development of sport in Northern Ireland. No grant-in-aid is provided to Sport NI to enable it to finance sporting organisations' legal costs or the dismissal settlements of such organisations' staff. Moreover, Sport NI has several controls in place to ensure that public moneys that are provided to sports organisations are used for the intended purposes only. That applies to all sports organisations, including the IFA.

Mr Lunn asked whether money is being withheld. My understanding is that not all the money that was set aside under the soccer strategy has been drawn down yet. However, it would be wrong to describe it as being withheld.

Mr Kennedy: The Minister and all Members will join me in condemning the disgraceful scenes that led to the abandonment of the Irish Cup tie between Newry City and Larne last weekend. Given that one of the overriding factors in that incident seems to be the lack of —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That has nothing whatsoever to do with the question in hand.

Mrs M Bradley: What measures does the IFA intend to put in place in all grounds to deal with situations such as the serious trouble that took place at Seaview and Newry over the past two weeks?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That has no relevance to the main question.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given the Minister's worries about finances and so on, is he concerned about the nature of the contract, which is apparently worth several hundred thousand pounds, that is being negotiated for Nigel Worthington to manage a team that does not even cover all of Ulster?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: First, the contract between the IFA and Nigel Worthington is a matter for the IFA. Secondly, I am sure that many Members on this side of the Chamber are enthusiastic supporters of the national team of Northern Ireland.

Lord Browne: Is the Minister satisfied with the IFA's speed and commitment in progressing the reform of governance and administration under the soccer strategy, considering that the report was published in 2001?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I recognise that the IFA has made progress over the past few years in reforming the governance of the game. However, more still needs to be done, and, as I have

indicated, the process of change needs to be accelerated. I have already made my views on those matters known directly to the association's chief executive, Patrick Nelson. I believe that he is committed to addressing those problems and continuing the process of much needed improvement to the governance of the game. He has my full support in that regard.

Marching Bands

2. **Mr T Clarke** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the role of marching bands in the culture and artistic tapestry of Northern Ireland. (AQO 605/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There are hundreds of marching bands in Ulster, including flute, accordion, pipe and silver bands. It has been estimated that as many as 20,000 people make music in those bands. The bands provide access to musical instruction and music making for many thousands of people, particularly young people, and as they improve their standards they also provide a pathway to musical excellence.

More than £815,000 has been provided by the Ulster-Scots Agency in the past five years for musical tuition. The Arts Council has also allocated almost £880,000 for bands in the past five years. The marching bands represent what is probably the largest community arts sector in Northern Ireland, and it is important to ensure that the tradition is conserved, promoted and developed. To that end, I am engaging with representatives of the sector to seek their views on ways to support future development and inform growth, education and excellence for marching bands across Northern Ireland.

Mr T Clarke: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. I am pleased about the amount of funding that the bands have received in the past five years. Given that the marching bands play such a large part in our Protestant and unionist culture, will the Minister give a commitment that that funding will continue while he is Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The funding for the marching bands was provided by the Ulster-Scots Agency and the Arts Council. I am most hopeful that both organisations will continue those funding streams. They may be refined or amended in some way, but it is important that there is support to enable the many young people who gain musical experience through the bands to continue to have access to music and the pathway to excellence that I mentioned.

We should also look at ways of supporting the bands, not merely through funding but in other ways. I think that there are opportunities and possibilities to

enhance the sector that need to be realised. There are tremendous benefits for young people not only in developing musical ability and experience but in acquiring social skills and in contributing to the cultural and social life of their community.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister appears to place a disproportionate emphasis on the importance of loyalist marching bands, which seems to take up 20% of his speaking time. Nonetheless, will he take a look at some of the websites of some of the loyalist marching bands in question, and will he share with us the work that he is carrying out to nudge loyalist marching bands in the direction of a shared and better future? After all, working towards a shared and better future is one of the Minister's stated objectives.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member is right to state that I am committed to the principle of a shared and better future. That is applied not just to bands but to sporting organisations, sports grounds and a range of elements under the Department's remit.

I confess that I do not normally spend my spare time reviewing the websites of bands or of other cultural organisations. However, those who are engaged in funding streams do take account of such websites. The Member will be aware that seven recent applications have not been processed by the Ulster-Scots Agency because of inappropriate website content, as I previously mentioned. That is a matter that funding bodies take on board, and rightly so. It needs to be taken on board across the sector. It is important that we achieve a shared future for the different aspects that are under the remit of my Department.

Mr Kinahan: Does the funding that the Minister mentioned go towards band uniforms and other costs?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: No, it does not. Funding is available for musical instruments through the Arts Council. Furthermore, funding is also available for tuition costs. For example, more than £815,000 has been provided by the Ulster-Scots Agency in the past five years for musical tuition. The Arts Council has allocated almost £880,000 of funding to bands in the past five years.

Mr O'Loan: The code of conduct of the Parades Commission sets clear rules for bands on their general conduct and particular rules on passing places of worship and through areas where the majority of the population are of a different tradition. Does the Minister ensure that there is no history of a breach of those rules when applications for funding are made to his Department?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The responsibility of the Parades Commission, which is an extremely controversial organisation, has given rise to a

lot of controversy in Northern Ireland. That organisation is not within the remit of the Assembly and therefore is not something into which I have any input.

We asked that the Arts Council and the Ulster-Scots Agency do what they can in assessing whether not just bands but other organisations commit themselves to the concept of a shared future. The outworking of that is solely a responsibility of the Arts Council and other funding bodies. The indications that I have given are that they are doing a reasonable job in that regard.

2012 Olympics

3. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to meet with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland to discuss joint initiatives in the lead-up to the 2012 Olympics.

(AQO 606/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The focus of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic activities outside London is on the nations and regions of the United Kingdom, which includes the devolved Administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Although there have been meetings between my Department and the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism, I have no plans for any future meetings with my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland.

Mrs D Kelly: I take it that the Minister means he has no plans to meet his counterpart in the South of Ireland on this particular issue. Given the reduction in funding to the Minister's Department in recent weeks, will he assure the House that he has sufficient money to invest in elite facilities here in the North?

3.15 pm

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Applications to stage two of the elite facilities programme are being considered. That competition proposes facilities for a wide range of sports including cycling, rowing, canoeing, tennis, equestrian sport, yachting, athletics, basketball and volleyball. The process of a judicial review during 2009 caused several months' delay. However, Sport NI is moving forward with the programme and hopes to be in a position to provide interested parties with an update on the programme timetable in due course.

In light of the potential for restricted capital budgets to emerge from the next comprehensive spending review, the Department is engaging with Sport NI concerning the justification for moving successful applicants to full business case stage. The matter is a work in progress, but we recognise that there are budgetary constraints. If the Department for Social Development or another Department wants to make

additional money available to DCAL, we will be only too happy to receive it.

Mr Weir: Will the Minister provide an update on the proposed 2012 Olympic project at Ballyholme Yacht Club?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Ballyholme Yacht Club is one of the 26 venues that were selected for inclusion in the pre-games training camp guide for the 2012 Olympic Games. Sport NI is the lead organisation in seeking to secure teams or countries to train in Northern Ireland in the lead-up to the 2012 games, and it has made funding of £3,000 per sports governing body available to assist in securing camps in Northern Ireland. I dealt with the issue of funding for those facilities earlier, and I have now set out the situation regarding the opportunities for attracting a training camp to Ballyholme.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister update the Assembly on Northern Ireland's participation in the 2012 Olympics? Has he been able to secure any further involvement for the Province?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: We need to keep it in mind that there are still almost three years to go until the 2012 games. To date, Northern Ireland businesses have been awarded nine contracts, valued in excess of £60 million, in connection with the development of the Olympic park. Between now and the games in 2012, 91,000 primary school children will participate in Activ8, a programme aimed at increasing physical activity in that age group. Some 94,000 visitors to the Ulster American Folk Park have had an opportunity to see the boxing exhibition, which was awarded a London 2012 Inspire mark for excellence and innovative programming. Some 9,000 members of the public have participated in two London 2012 open weekends.

Disabled artists from Northern Ireland will have the opportunity to be awarded commissions and showcase their work internationally through Unlimited, a unique programme for arts and disability. Legacy Trust UK has awarded £1.31 million to arts projects that incorporate sport. As I have outlined, opportunities exist for businesses, for volunteering and to raise the profile of sport among young people. In that regard, the emphasis is very much on the relationship between sport and tackling obesity and improving health standards.

Community Arts

4. **Mrs O'Neill** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if the Arts Council will increase the level of funding for community arts organisations.

(AQO 607/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Arts Council estimates that 20% of its funding, through the Annual Support for Organisations Programme, its main funding programme, is allocated to community arts. That equates to £2 million per annum. The figure rises to 56%, or £7.9 million, when all the Arts Council's principal Exchequer and lottery-funded programmes are taken into consideration.

Community arts is quite a broad sector, and it is not covered exclusively by what might be regarded as community arts organisations. Many arts organisations that are represented in the Arts Council's funding programmes work within a youth and community context, and there is also a cohort of community arts organisations. The Arts Council considers all applications for funding in the context of DCAL and Arts Council strategies and in light of budgetary allocations.

My Department and its arm's-length bodies will continue to support organisations and individuals in finding appropriate funding and maximising value for money. However, people must be realistic about the level of funding that will be available. The current economic climate means that public expenditure is tight, and funding for the arts will be under increasing pressure, as will all areas of Government expenditure.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Following a recent Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure inquiry, I understand that one of its recommendations was on funding for community arts projects. I support that recommendation and refer Members to one such project in my constituency, Craic Theatre. It is an excellent example of a community-based theatre that not only helps young people to develop theatrical skills but to build their confidence. How will the Minister respond to all the Committee's recommendations and to that one in particular?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sometimes, there is no clear line of demarcation between community arts and voluntary arts. However, in the course of several conversations with the Arts Council, I made it clear that I regard community and voluntary arts as extremely important, and the council expressed the same view. Community arts have not been forgotten. I have had meetings with people from the community arts sector. I will continue with those meetings and with my conversations with the Arts Council.

Ms Lo: In comparison with the other parts of the UK, we have the lowest rate of public funding for the arts and receive little corporate sponsorship. Does the Minister agree that that is detrimental to the growth not only of the arts sector but of the overall economy?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It would be easy for me to say that more resources would be better and fewer resources are detrimental. However, what is important is how the funding situation is addressed.

We must consider how to bring more funding into the arts. I flag up two issues about which I spoke with the Arts Council. First, greater emphasis must be placed on private sector sponsorship. The fact that we are some distance from London, where the large corporations are based, causes some difficulties. Nevertheless, I commend the work that Arts and Business already does. I met members of that organisation here and their counterparts in Scotland. We had preliminary discussions on what my Department can do to support their work and encourage greater investment from the private sector. The potential exists to increase the amount of money that the private sector invests. Secondly, the number of people going through the doors of arts venues must increase. As more people buy tickets and attend events, that becomes the source of more revenue. Therefore, we must look not only to central government public sector funding but to private sector funding and other opportunities. Local government can be another area that provides support to the arts. A huge variation exists between the amounts of money that councils invest in the arts. I will not name individual councils. The figure invested does not depend on the size of the area or its population but is calculated per person. The amount varies from almost £29 per person to 37p per person. As I look around the Chamber, I see a Member who represents the Ards Peninsula.

Local government, central government and the private sector all have a role to play. They can all help to get more people through the doors, which is the issue on which we should now concentrate.

Mr D Bradley: Tá ceist agam don Aire faoi ealaíona pobail ar bhonn trasphobail. Are there any funding incentives available to encourage the promotion of community arts on a cross-community basis?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I do not think that the Arts Council, which is the organisation that disperses the money, has a particular funding stream for cross-community projects. However, it has funding to encourage and support cultural diversity. That is not quite the same as cross-community funding, but I think that it has a remit to support cultural diversity. In fact, it is disappointing that the money that the Arts Council received previously in that regard, which came from the Department of Education, was stopped because the community relations policy in the Department of Education was reviewed.

I am keen to get more money into the arts. People talk sometimes about doing that in a cross-departmental way, but that has to involve people bringing money to the table. If money is available in the Department for

Social Development or the Department of Education, I would be only too happy to take that and contribute to more investment in cross-community, cross-cultural and intercultural arts.

Lough Neagh

5. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline his Department's vision for developing the leisure and recreation potential of Lough Neagh. (AQO 608/10)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Leisure and recreation around Lough Neagh includes leisure and recreation on the shore, on the water and in the water. Therefore, we are talking about a range of activities. I am aware that some groups have organised musical programmes and festivals around the River Bann, an obvious example of which takes place in Portglenone. Some leisure activities, such as water skiing and sailing, occur on the water, and others, such as fishing, take place on the water or from the shore. I am keen to see the maximum potential developed so that the maximum use is made of Lough Neagh, which is an excellent and important resource.

In addition to the recreational value, leisure and recreation are an integral part of tourism. As such, essentially, they come under the remit of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and of the Tourist Board. My Department's functions in relation to Lough Neagh are limited to a statutory requirement to dredge the channels and maintain navigation posts at the entrance to the Six Mile Water as well as maintaining, as a public service, 47 hazard markers around the Lough Neagh shoreline. Within our limited remit, however, we continue to explore the scope for developing Province-wide the recreational and navigational potential of all inland waterways, including Lough Neagh.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for his answer. Lough Neagh is important as it is the central hub that links the Ulster canal with the north coast. It will also eventually link Coleraine with Limerick. In what work is the Minister involved with the Dublin Administration to try to bring that about? In relation to festivals and events around the lough, what funding can the Minister put into those through the likes of the Lough Neagh Partnership?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I recognise the importance of Lough Neagh. It is the largest lake not only in the United Kingdom but in the British Isles. Obviously, it is of tremendous importance. I am sure that Mr Molloy will recognise its unique position in the context that I outlined.

There are a number of complexities in relation to Lough Neagh. The fishing rights in the lough belong to the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative Society,

with minor rights being held by the Shane's Castle estate and The Honourable The Irish Society. We would like to promote angling development on Lough Neagh, but it is a private fishery. Currently, no resource is allocated to assist with private fishery development. There are programmes to develop leisure and recreation, but the onus is very much on those who are committed to Lough Neagh to see how they can match their vision to the available funding streams.

Mr I McCrea: Will the Minister detail his Department's involvement with the Lough Neagh Partnership on water sports, and so on?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Lough Neagh Partnership's administration has been fully funded by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and is fully supported by the seven benefiting local authorities, without the need for DCAL funding. DCAL has an observer role on the Lough Neagh Partnership board. The Department has supported its highly valued delivery programme, and I wish the partnership every future success.

3.30 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Landlord Registration

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the efforts currently being made by the Minister for Employment and Learning to address the ongoing issues related to the Holylands area of south Belfast; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to introduce mandatory landlord registration, as landlord registration has been identified by stakeholders as a necessary step in addressing these issues. — [*Mr A Maskey.*]

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím chun tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún.

I begin my support for the motion by commending the ongoing efforts to resolve the issue in the Holylands area, particularly by those who are working with the residents' association. Alex Maskey is doing a great job — he told me to say that — as is Jimmy Spratt. I had better watch that I do not leave anyone out.

All Members are well aware of the difficulties endured by the area. I have no doubt that mandatory landlord registration would help to eradicate some bad practices that have compounded that situation. In the past, there have been similar problems in residential areas surrounding the Magee campus in my Derry constituency — since I am commending everybody, I have to say “stand up for Derry” — albeit on a lesser scale than the Holylands. However, in the context of the expansion of Magee, towards which we are all working, I am conscious that those issues could arise again. It is vital to plan ahead to avoid the creation of another Holylands scenario in Derry.

All Members will concur that mandatory landlord registration is relevant not only to student areas. We all know that we face a serious housing crisis and that the need for social housing is being failed by the private rented sector. Although the vast majority of landlords are responsible, there is a small minority of unscrupulous landlords who charge extortionate rents, provide substandard or even dangerous accommodation and prey on vulnerable people.

I have seen, as have other Members in their constituencies, some absolutely disgraceful properties that are unfit for human habitation being rented to young families, particularly single mothers. The landlords who rent them out are paid handsomely from public funds for exploiting what some may call vulnerable people.

For too long, the housing sector has been largely unregulated. Despite the fact that the Assembly passed

a Sinn Féin motion some two years ago calling for mandatory regulation, we are still awaiting it. Therefore, I am disappointed that the Department for Social Development (DSD) consultation paper appears to rule out mandatory regulation. Perhaps the Minister will clarify that.

Mr Leonard: As well as broadening out the debate from the Holylands to Derry, does the Member accept that the area around Coleraine, including Portstewart and Portrush, would also be involved? Does she further accept that the point that she has made about the lack of social and affordable housing is impacting on more than students? It has an impact on many young families who cannot afford to get on the first rung of the property ladder and is affecting people for whom social housing is not provided. This is a broad geographical issue, as well as being about types of housing and the reasons why legislation is required to tighten up the landlord system.

Ms Anderson: I definitely agree with the Member. Based on objective need, there are many areas across the North that would favour having mandatory registration legislation in place. People working in some of those areas are disappointed that the DSD consultation paper on the strategy for the private rented sector appears to rule out mandatory registration.

The Department focuses on the problems that are associated with the mandatory schemes that were introduced in Scotland and in the South, such as the high cost and the bureaucracy involved. The only approach that DSD seems to advocate for promoting good landlord management is voluntary accreditation, an approach that is criticised by organisations such as the Housing Rights Service.

In fact, only the good landlords will voluntarily register. Although there are many good landlords, as we would all agree, they are not the problem. Maybe the Minister will clarify this point, but in the Department for Social Development's document, 'Building Sound Foundations: A Strategy for the Private Rented Sector', it appears to have ruled out a mandatory registration scheme on the basis:

"It would not provide the most effective means of targeting those landlords who are not complying with current law".

It continues:

"Such landlords are likely to continue to evade registration".

Neither would a voluntary scheme provide such a means, because those who evade their responsibilities to tenants are not likely to sign up to a scheme that will penalise them for doing so. Therefore, rather than focusing on the difficulties that are associated with other schemes, DSD should learn from those examples and develop its own best practice.

Elsewhere, new proposals have been developed for a light-touch registration scheme, and it is envisaged that such a register would be run by an independent organisation. I think that that would be welcomed by all. In addition, landlords would be required to register for a nominal fee to cover administration costs. It is also anticipated that such a register would be web-based and would require minimal information, such as landlords' names and addresses and the addresses of the properties being let. In return, a web-based system would offer landlords services, such as property advertising and free documents, including tenancy agreements. The Minister would do well to take cognisance of those proposals before finalising her approach, and perhaps that is something that she intends to do. I support the motion, and I call on Members to do the same.

Mr Craig: I support the motion, which calls on the Minister for Social Development to look at introducing a mandatory landlord registration scheme. I support the introduction of such a scheme because the rental sector needs to be regulated. In some respects and in some areas, the rental sector is out of control. In particular, the sector grew as a result of the property boom that we experienced in the past two or three years. Although the economic downturn has to some extent squashed that growth, there are still a huge number of people who purchased investment properties in order to rent them out.

The university area in south Belfast — the Holylands — has been mentioned again and again, and we have all seen headlines about antisocial behaviour by students whose numbers are concentrated in that very small area. The buy-to-rent market and the growth in the private rental sector have been detrimental to the Holylands community, and a significant problem arose during that period of growth. For a long time, the problem went unnoticed and unchallenged. The rental sector there needs to be regulated urgently.

However, I offer a word of caution. If one looks at jurisdictions in which mandatory registration has been introduced, such as Scotland, where a scheme has been in place since 2006, one finds that there have been ongoing issues. Not everything has gone smoothly. The scheme in Scotland was introduced on the basis that it would be self-sufficient, but, although the best ideas were put in place to ensure that it would not cost the Government any money, almost four years later, the Government have had to step in, time and time again, to subsidise the running of it. As we are part of a legislature that needs to learn lessons from other areas, we must be very cautious and careful about the complexity of the system that we set up here.

The Scottish Government tried to base the scheme in councils. It is clear, however, that it has run into huge difficulties. Given that some landlords own

properties throughout many council areas in Scotland, the scheme has proved very difficult to administrate and follow up. When we are looking at a registration scheme, we should learn the lessons of the Scottish experience and consider having a centrally based scheme. This is only a suggestion, but a light-touch registration scheme could be run by an organisation that already exists, such as the Housing Executive.

Policing the scheme is another problem that comes to mind. The Housing Executive and others have had difficulties policing the whole area of HMOs. Given that, we must ask how we will enforce registration. In some respects, I do not believe that it can be fully enforced, because there will always be those who will want to operate outside the box. For financial reasons, those people will not want to meet the regulations, making any scheme difficult to police. When the Minister is considering a scheme, it is important that she looks closely at how it can be enforced and, more importantly, at how it can be administered, so that it does not cost the taxpayer an absolute fortune to run. However, despite all that, I still think that, overall, it is positive to have a scheme. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr McCallister: I declare an interest, as my wife owns a second home, and I benefit indirectly from the rental income, although not as much as I would like.

In the past, my party supported calls in the House to regulate the private rented sector. We want to see that happen and hope that the Minister is working towards that end. In 2007, Sir John Semple's final report on the review into affordable housing in Northern Ireland stated:

"A registration system offering an independent mediation and arbitration service should give tenants more confidence in the sector and will provide landlords with a mechanism for managing difficulties that commonly arise during a tenancy such as disputes regarding rent increases, return of deposits and contractual issues."

We agree with Sir John's analysis. We believe that light regulation that is constructed in a way that will not add a significant burden to either the public purse or the industry is the best way to reform our private rented sector. During the previous debate on the issue, the Minister commented that she did not believe that mandatory registration would be a panacea to the problems in the private rented sector; she could be right about that. However, given that element of doubt, I will be interested to hear what benefits the Minister's Department has recorded from the mandatory registration of HMOs, which has already been enforced in Northern Ireland.

3.45 pm

Analysis of that policy, together with the results of the consultation that was conducted last year on the matter, should provide the Minister with enough

information to move forward quickly if she has not already made up her mind. I ask the Minister to use the debate as an opportunity to lay her cards on the table. The issue has been discussed in the House previously, and we want to know whether she is going to legislate on it. I ask that, because when the issue was debated in October 2008, the Minister rightly chastised Sinn Féin for holding up Executive business at that time, and she told us that she had a housing Bill that would regulate the private rented sector. However, it is now January 2010, and that housing Bill is still not in front of us, but more importantly, there is no indication of the Minister's decision on the matter. I hope that she will come down on the side of light registration. The House has come down on that side on more than one occasion, as has the Minister's party. It is now time for us to move forward on the issue.

The amount of legislative time that the Assembly has left in the current session is running out fast, so the Minister must move quickly if she wants to make progress during the current term. I am concerned about several pieces of legislation that are coming forward from the Executive; the proposed housing Bill being a prime example. At present, the Assembly is little more than a year away from an election. It is quickly coming to the point when there will be no time left in the legislative timetable to achieve what all Members want. Even if the Minister were able to tell the Assembly what policy decisions she has taken on the regulation of the private rented sector, is she not concerned that she may run out of time to get the necessary legislation through the House?

I want to turn to the issue of the Holylands. I join with the Members who moved the motion in congratulating the Minister for Employment and Learning on his efforts on that issue. Other Members have noted the leadership that he has shown in tackling antisocial behaviour and in bringing together a forum of key stakeholders, which has made several proposals to improve the situation, including the use of CCTV.

Mr A Maskey: I thank the Member for giving way, given that the time that he has left to speak is brief. I want to reiterate his comments about the Minister for Employment and Learning. Does the Member agree with the Minister's assertion that he needs substantive support from other Ministers and Departments that have power to legislate on those matters?

Mr McCallister: I thank the Member for his useful intervention and agree with him. To deal with the Holylands, many cross-departmental issues, such as alcohol licensing, occupancy of houses and the problems that are faced by residents, must be tackled. CCTV alone, although it will be a useful tool, will not be the panacea to all the problems; other Departments must embrace their responsibilities.

As regards the subject of the debate, the registration of landlords, my party supports the light-touch regulation that other parties mentioned. I agree with Mr Craig that it should not mean an excessive cost to the public purse. My party supports the motion.

Mrs M Bradley: At the outset, I want to say that I hope that we will never again see events in the Holylands such as those that have disgraced our television screens. I commend the Minister for Employment and Learning and, indeed, the Minister for Social Development for their determined involvement in the multi-agency approach to prevent another such incident and to ensure improvements for people who reside in and around the Holylands, and, indeed, in other areas.

Most houses in the area are in multiple occupancy and are already subject to a registration process. The issue of mandatory registration for the private rented sector has already been debated in the Chamber on two occasions: Monday 1 October 2007 and Monday 13 October 2008. I am sure that there are good landlords in all Members' constituencies, as well as some who are unfit and are oblivious to everything except their cheques or Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety back payments.

In May 2009, the Minister for Social Development published a consultation paper entitled 'Building Sound Foundations — a Strategy for the Private Rented Sector'. The consultation finished in August. Its conclusions were based on other regions' experiences to date; the Republic of Ireland and Scotland, where mandatory registration is in place, were mentioned. The cost of implementing a similar scheme in Northern Ireland would be substantial to say the least, and there is no guarantee that it would make a considerable difference.

A briefing paper entitled 'An Overview of Landlord and Tenancy Registration Schemes in the Private Rented Sector' states that the Department's conclusion at that time is that the cost would far outweigh the benefits. Documents and papers from the Department for Social Development, such as the draft strategy for the private rented sector, should deliver more robust requirements for landlords and occupants alike. I am aware of pressures on DSD's budget and that the Minister needs to spend wisely, but I believe that the Minister will do precisely that while doing her level best to deliver.

I commend my colleague Margaret Ritchie and Sir Reg Empey for their work to date. I have no doubt that they will continue to participate proactively with the other agencies in seeking a resolution to the problem and in finding a deterrent to a repeat of the situation such as that which arose in the Holylands. However, I remind the proposers of the motion that the situation in the Holylands was an antisocial behaviour problem,

and that is a complex problem that defies all solutions. It was not the landlords who were out on the street pelting the police on St Patrick's Day; it was the people who were drunk. I support the motion.

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs M Bradley: Sorry; I have finished.

Mr Spratt: I am delighted to be able to take part in the debate. I support the motion. I am not a landlord. I might have been one in the past, but, thankfully, I no longer am. I had a property wrecked on two occasions, but somebody else has that headache now, and I was delighted to hand it over.

Lord Morrow: It was not profitable.

Mr Spratt: It became less profitable; that is correct. This has been a good debate. Housing and housing problems are among the main issues that we all have to grapple with daily in our constituency offices. I am always concerned about the number of folks who live in private rental accommodation, particularly in south Belfast, who do not know the contact details of their landlords. In some cases, they do not even know who their landlords are, because they have leased the property from a rental company, for instance. Heating systems, among other things, often break down, and the tenants are left in dire circumstances and cannot get anything done to solve their problems. It is difficult for those of us to whom they come for help to do anything for them.

I would welcome some form of registration. However, there are many good landlords, particularly in the Holylands. Often, it has been made to appear that the problems and the things that have happened lie at the doors of those landlords. In many cases, that is not accurate, because many of them run good and successful businesses. On the whole, many of them do a fairly good job.

Considering that the Holylands has been mentioned in the motion, it is important to point out that many other organisations, such as the universities, the Police Service, Belfast City Council and various other groups have put a tremendous amount of work into trying to solve the problem. Often, students get the blame for such things as the terrible events, which we saw on our televisions, that took place on St Patrick's Day last year. People are happy to blame students, and they are particularly happy to blame Queen's University, because the events took place in close proximity to it — a university that has done much and put a lot of finance into trying to help solve the problem by providing wardens, for instance. However, when Members look at the statistics relating to the arrests that were made during last year's St Patrick's Day events, they will see that 11 of the 19 people who were arrested were not students. Therefore it is wrong to blame students as the easy target on every occasion. I want to be fair to

everybody and remind the House of those statistics. I think, and I hope, that most folks will accept that.

If an independent organisation similar to that which exists in Scotland and in other areas is introduced, I am concerned that it will be another costly level of bureaucracy. The last thing that we need is another quango somewhere in the middle. The Housing Executive and the housing associations do an excellent job, but the housing associations need to look at some of their practices in relation to payments, for instance, and to have them examined regularly, because residents do not know what they are getting. I am concerned that the introduction of an independent organisation will become an additional burden to the folk who have to rent private property.

Whether we like it or not, any charges will be passed on to the people who rent the property. Some of those people are already in dire circumstances and, as another Member pointed out, they are in private rented accommodation because they cannot get onto the property ladder.

The Minister must look very carefully at whatever system is put in place.

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

Mr Spratt: I will, Mr Deputy Speaker. I urge that some kind of registration be put in place, because folks who rent private property need to know who they are renting it from. I support the motion.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I am not a landlord, but I am a former student resident of the Holylands.

Today's motion provides a welcome and timely opportunity to highlight the considerable work that my colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning and I have undertaken to deliver improvements for those living in the Holylands area of south Belfast. The motion calls on me to introduce mandatory registration, as landlord responsibility has been identified by stakeholders as a necessary step to address the issues.

I am surprised by the motion, given that it is well known that a robust registration scheme is already in place in that area, as the majority of properties are houses in multiple occupation. Despite that, the ongoing problems, mainly associated with antisocial behaviour in the Holylands, have been well documented. The situation in the area is unacceptable, and a multi-agency response is in place involving a wide range of diverse partners working together to provide solutions and to minimise the problems in the area. The partners include Belfast City Council, the Planning Service, the Housing Executive and the Police Service, along with the universities and colleges. Those partners have created an action plan for the Holylands that focuses on five

areas: alcohol; policing; student accommodation and physical infrastructure; student behaviour; and Holylands management and monitoring.

Of the 20 proposed measures to address the problems in the area, three fall to my Department. The first involves the issue of alcohol, and I intend to introduce legislation to close nuisance premises; the second is further consideration of physical development in the Holylands area; and the third relates to the regulation of HMOs, including the intention to increase fees for non-compliance.

As Members can see, dealing with housing issues is only part of the solution. The make-up of the Holylands shows that the great majority of the properties in it are in the private rented sector and most are houses of multiple occupation and are subject to rigorous regulation. The statutory registration scheme for HMOs began registering houses in the Holylands from 1 October 2005, with the aim of registering all HMOs in the area by 1 September 2012.

The registration scheme requires that all owners and managers of HMOs ensure that their properties are brought up to satisfactory physical standards; that they provide appropriate information and advice on the HMO sector to tenants and prospective tenants; that they ensure that HMOs are well managed; and that they ensure that the adverse effects of concentrations of HMOs are reduced. To date, 336 HMOs in that area have been registered from a total of 883 identified from the Housing Executive's database.

Although less than half the HMOs in the area are registered, registration is ongoing and the Housing Executive will register all HMOs in the area by 1 September 2012. However, whether registered or not, the Housing Executive has the power to take whatever statutory action is necessary to deal with HMOs that are not complying with the HMO management regulations. Those regulations make provision for ensuring that the person managing a HMO observes proper standards of management.

That action takes the form of serving appropriate statutory notices that can require that an HMO be brought up to full required standards; that it be made fit for human habitation; that the manager of the property must comply with the HMO management regulations to ensure the repair, maintenance, cleansing or good order of the property; and that action must be taken to reduce any overcrowding in an HMO. All those notices are time-bound, and, if the landlord or manager of the HMO does not carry out the required works or take the required action in the specified time, prosecution procedures will be commenced.

4.00 pm

A mandatory registration scheme has been in place for HMOs since 2005. HMOs pose high levels of

health and safety risk and arguably give rise to a disproportionate amount of antisocial behaviour in local communities. The Housing Executive's registration scheme was imposed to tackle those issues and ensure that non-compliance is tackled effectively.

The Housing Executive has learned from its experience of working in the HMO sector and has strengthened its original strategy. A revised strategy issued in 2009 sets out a series of proposals to improve conditions in the HMO sector and to deal with any issues that may arise. Action taken as part of that strategy includes work on the training and awareness of HMO landlords, and several seminars have been held across Northern Ireland and have been well attended and received. To complement the registration scheme, I will introduce legislation to strengthen the fines for offences relating to the management of HMOs in the second housing Bill, which I intend to introduce before the summer.

In addition to the registration of HMO landlords, the education of all private tenants and landlords on their rights and responsibilities is essential and forms part of the strategy for the private rented sector. A good deal of work has already been done on that through the provision of leaflets and guidebooks, information on websites and landlord awareness seminars on the private rented sector. In addition, the Housing Executive's work with students, in particular making sixth-form students aware of their responsibilities when they become private sector tenants at university, is a very useful part of its management of HMOs.

HMO registration is applicable on a phased basis to all HMO properties in Northern Ireland, and it is regularly evaluated and reviewed to ensure that its objectives are met. I will ensure that the lessons continue to be learned from that scheme and that they are considered by the wider private rented sector.

I turn to some of the issues that were raised during the debate. In proposing the motion, Alex Maskey referred to two specific issues. The first of those concerned the registration of landlords, and, although there has not yet been any formal evaluation of the impact of the registration scheme in Scotland, there is some evidence that the scheme has delivered limited benefits, albeit at a considerable financial cost, a point that has already been raised by Mr Craig. It is clear that registration does not offer a panacea for all perceived problems in the private rented sector, and, although it may make a useful contribution, it will form only part of the solution in conjunction with tenancy deposit schemes, dispute resolution arrangements and better security of tenure.

Alex also raised the issue of tenancy deposits. Responses to the consultation document on a strategy for the private rented sector strongly supported the

introduction of a tenancy deposit scheme in Northern Ireland, and I intend to introduce such a scheme as part of the second housing Bill.

Simon Hamilton raised two specific issues: the effectiveness of the Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and the cost of the HMO registration scheme. There are some merits in mandatory landlord registration, but they would come at a considerable cost. The Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 has been in place since April 2007, and Mr Hamilton raised important points about its application. The strategy that I will bring forward in the spring will strengthen the law and deliver effective enforcement.

Anna Lo and Thomas Burns referred to some deficiencies in the Private Tenancies Order 2006, which my Department hopes to address through further legislation. John McCallister raised the issue of learning from HMO registration and stated that, as registration proceeds, lessons can be learned on an ongoing basis. Although such registration has been costly and slow to implement, with little evidence of a positive impact on addressing antisocial behaviour, there has been a positive impact on addressing the physical standards of buildings, the provision of information and advice, and increasing people's awareness of rights and responsibilities.

As part of the new housing agenda, I am committed to ensuring that everyone has access to a decent, affordable home, and the private rented sector has an increasingly important role to play, particularly as it provides homes for a diverse range of households. I have developed proposals, held a public consultation and given consideration to the responses that I have received. I am now considering the way forward through a private rented sector strategy that will be issued in the spring. My work to develop that strategy will ensure that core priority issues in the sector are effectively addressed. Subject to the outline of that work, new legislation to give life to the new strategy for the sector will be required and will be included in the second housing Bill. I welcome a strong vote of support for the work I have put in place to improve conditions in the private rented sector through the development of a strategic framework to ensure that everyone in our society has access to a decent, secure and affordable home.

It appears that there is significant misunderstanding about DSD's potential contribution to the solutions to the issues in the Holylands, which are essentially of a cross-cutting nature, requiring a collective response from government. Mr Empey and his Department have played a lead role in that work to date, and continued success requires ongoing significant input from the Planning Service, NIO, the police and Belfast City Council.

My Department is ready to consider landlord registration as part of its private rented sector strategy, but it will not just be window dressing; it must be something that will work. I appeal to the party that brought the motion and several other motions to the Floor of the House to recognise that the central issue is antisocial behaviour. In the Holylands, landlord registration is that party's solution to antisocial behaviour; in Ross Street in west Belfast, its solution to antisocial behaviour is to demolish houses; and in relation to underage drinking and the resulting antisocial behaviour, its solution is to print something on the plastic bags used by off-licences. *[Interruption.]* Let us go beyond facile solutions and think about real solutions to antisocial behaviour. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister for Social Development: Let us come up with solutions that actually address and start to change the bad behaviour.

I will continue to support the important work of the inter-agency group in the Holylands area. I will continue, through the second housing Bill and the private rented sector strategy, which will be launched later this year, to take account of all the issues that are required to address the need for regulation of landlords and protection of tenants. I ask that all Members give their support to the many groups and agencies involved in that good work.

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

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank my colleague Alex Maskey for bringing the motion to the House. A similar motion has been debated in the House before, and, although Mr Maskey's motion is to some degree localised to his constituency, it highlights the serious problems and concerns people have that the unregistered housing sector has been allowed to exist without any type of control.

The Chamber unanimously endorsed a motion calling on the Minister to do something about the matter, and that motion was even backed by her party, but, to date, nothing has been done to tackle the problem.

Mr A Maskey: A few minutes ago, the Minister suggested that Sinn Féin has no proposals other than those that she outlined. Does the Member agree that the party has made routine and numerous representations directly to the Minister? As a local representative, I have had meetings with her during which I discussed complex proposals at length and in considerable detail, not only for the Holylands but for other areas. It would be wrong to suggest that Sinn Féin has a single mind on the matter; it is much more complex than that, and that has not been acknowledged by the Minister.

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for his intervention, and, as a member of the Committee for Social Development, I agree with his comments.

I know that the issue comes to prominence every year in south Belfast with the continued cycle of trouble there, but that is only a small part of the difficulties that residents who live there have had to endure for many years. The mandatory registration of landlords would be a major advance for residents in that area. Over the years, the character of the area has changed from being a residential area to being a largely private rental area, although local residents have worked to retain what is left of the residential nature of the area, and they hope that they can reverse the adverse effect that that change has brought.

It is also worth pointing out that DSD has a statutory obligation to protect the residential character of areas. In many constituencies, areas that were once noted for their strong community spirit have been completely undermined by the speed of change. For example, in my constituency of Newry and Armagh, whole streets are filled with signs advertising houses for rent. How long will it be before the Department carries out an impact study on the steep rise in private renting in areas where the residential aspect is also declining? Many of those areas have a character that has been shaped by over 100 years of family living.

Distinctions can be made among landlords who control houses in multiple occupation and those with houses that are seen as private rented houses. The Minister has made much of the issue concerning houses in multiple occupation. It has been stated that HMOs are supposed to be registered, and the Minister talked about registration being completed by 2012, particularly for the Holylands area. The issues around the private rented sector do not affect only the Holylands or Belfast; they affect areas throughout the North. In many cases, my constituency included, antisocial behaviour in estates comes from the private rented sector, where there is no control and where people can move from house to house without any restriction.

It needs to be mentioned that some landlords are good, but, in many cases, landlords have houses that are unregistered, and they ignore rules that may exist by providing houses that become overcrowded or are in poor condition. Any rights that the tenant may have are often flouted, illegal evictions take place, tenants are overcharged, deposits are withheld, and complaints are ignored. I recognise that a substantial number of landlords provide excellent accommodation and treat their tenants fairly. They would welcome the introduction of a registration scheme that brought to book those in the sector who, in some cases, have substantial numbers of properties and who view providing houses to rent as an easy way to make money.

Many people in the statutory and voluntary housing sector welcomed the introduction of the Private Tenancies Order 2006 as a move in the right direction but thought that it did not go far enough. They believe that a golden opportunity was missed, as strong legislation could have been introduced that would have allowed the people implementing the Order to have the power to ensure compliance.

As other Members who spoke in the debate said, any sector that is in receipt of over £90 million a year should be brought to book when it is considered that, in many cases, the community sector is hounded for relatively small amounts of money. Why is there resistance to making the private rented sector more accountable?

I will mention some of the issues that Members brought up in their speeches. Alex Maskey said that landlords who acted in a professional manner should not fear anything from mandatory registration. There are unscrupulous landlords who obviously would.

4.15 pm

Simon Hamilton seemed somewhat peeved that he could not declare an interest as a landlord, although that may be just a personal observation. He said that most stakeholders would welcome the provision of information for landlords and tenants, particularly on overcrowding, and that unfitness should be rooted out. He went on to say that basic requirements, such as the need for tenancy agreements and rent books, are not being enforced.

Anna Lo spoke about the St Patrick's Day violence in the Holylands and the efforts of local resident and student groups to solve problems. She spoke about the transient population of migrant workers and students and said that there are many good landlords.

David Hilditch welcomed the debate. He believes that mandatory landlord registration will protect landlords and their property. He said that stakeholders recognise that registration is essential and that, in many places, the private rented sector has replaced social housing, adding that students in the Holylands in particular have to accept responsibility for their actions. He congratulated the Minister for Employment and Learning on his action plan for the Holylands.

Billy Armstrong spoke about private landlords and private tenants being a problem in some areas. Thomas Burns, who declared an interest as a landlord, commended the Minister for Social Development — surprise, surprise — for her good work in the Holylands. He also mentioned the work that the Minister for Employment and Learning has done. He spoke about the increased number of students, friction between groups being an understatement and university-led approval for student accommodation, which should cover more than simply mandatory registration. He

said that landlords should be responsible for tenants and play a greater role in managing disputes.

Jonathan Craig supported the motion and called on the Minister to introduce a mandatory registration scheme. He spoke about the cost of such a scheme, particularly in Scotland, where there are ongoing problems. He said that lessons need to be learned if a scheme is to be introduced here. He pointed out that there are huge difficulties in Scotland because the scheme is council-based and that any scheme introduced here should have a centralised base.

John McCallister declared an interest as a landlord, and I am delighted to hear that he has a bolt-hole should things go wrong. He supported the call for registration, and he spoke about disputes, rent increases and deposits. He said that legislation should be constructed in such a way that it would not cost a huge amount to implement. He also spoke about the delay in bringing the second housing Bill before the Assembly.

Martina Anderson said that she is aware of the difficulties in the Holylands. She also mentioned — again: surprise, surprise — Derry and made the valid point that, if there were an increase in student accommodation in Derry, that would need to be planned for and campuses enlarged. She went on to say that mandatory registration is not only relevant to student areas. She also spoke about the lack of social housing and its being replaced by the private rented sector in many ways. That applies not only to students and single people but to young families. Many of those houses are in poor condition, and landlords are paid handsomely from the public purse.

Billy Leonard spoke about student accommodation in Portrush and Portstewart, which he said is having an impact on young families. He said that the issues are broadly geographical. Mary Bradley spoke about unfit landlords. Jimmy Spratt has passed his landlord's baton to someone else and seems relieved about that. However, he appeared to be in favour of mandatory registration.

The Minister needs to make it clear whether she will introduce mandatory registration for private landlords. That was certainly not clear from her answer today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the efforts currently being made by the Minister for Employment and Learning to address the ongoing issues related to the Holylands area of south Belfast; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to introduce mandatory landlord registration, as landlord registration has been identified by stakeholders as a necessary step in addressing these issues.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker:*]

ADJOURNMENT

Project Kelvin in Newry and Armagh

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately eight minutes.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm seans a bheith agam an cheist thábhachtach seo a phlé inniu, nó baineann sí le toghcheantar an Iúir agus Ard Mhacha..

I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss and debate this important issue for the Newry and Armagh constituency. Project Kelvin aims to bring high-speed transatlantic Internet connection to this part of Ireland and to other parts too.

The map published by Hibernia Atlantic, the company which won the contract for Project Kelvin, showed that Newry was bypassed by the cable, whereas Dundalk, Castleblayney, Monaghan and Armagh were linked to it. I welcome the fact that Armagh was linked to it, but I was disappointed, like many others, that Newry had been excluded. The business, commercial and community interests in Newry are naturally dissatisfied with this arrangement, considering the fact that DETI announced, on 25 September 2006, that it would continue to target 30% of the Northern Ireland population by designating the six most deprived council areas in Northern Ireland, together with the most disadvantaged areas of Belfast, as the focus for activities aimed at tackling poverty and social need. The six council areas — Newry and Mourne, Strabane, Derry, Omagh, Cookstown and Dungannon — were selected by using data drawn from Northern Ireland Noble multiple deprivation measure. The then Minister said:

“DETI is firmly committed to playing its part in tackling the problems of deprivation and social exclusion in the most disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland. The updated maps represent a fair and objective approach to defining deprivation and will enable DETI and its agencies to effectively target resources ... those areas designated as disadvantaged will be afforded priority status”.

The equality impact assessment of Project Kelvin stated that the technical specification for the procurement specifically included evaluation criteria which would reward bid responses that proposed to bring the benefits of this investment across all Northern Ireland and that investment decisions would be taken having regard to DETI commitments and

policy statements and consideration of investment in areas of multiple deprivation.

Once again, the equality impact assessment cited the maps that I have referred to, issued by the Minister in 2006, and emphasised that areas designated as disadvantaged — one of which, as I said, was Newry — would be afforded priority status. In bypassing Newry, for whatever reason, it seems very much that DETI's own policies of affording priority status to disadvantaged areas were overlooked, if not totally ignored. Newry was already linked into the infrastructure with Armagh, but it was excluded. I welcome the Minister's presence in the Chamber, and I ask her why Newry was excluded and why DETI accepted that.

In a letter to me dated 15 September 2009, the Minister said that the only mandatory location in Northern Ireland was Derry, and that bidders for the tender issued by DETI and the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources were encouraged to include additional locations. I find it surprising that the tender allowed for such latitude, considering the Department's policy of affording priority status to the six councils on the new deprivation maps. Of those, only Strabane, Derry and Omagh emerged as locations, and Derry was, in any case, a mandatory location. Half of the targeted councils that were to be given priority status were not included in the locations outlined by the company that won the contract.

We need answers from DETI: was the policy for disadvantaged areas given any weighting whatsoever in the scoring system for tenders? If it was, how much was given? If it was not, why was it not? Those are important questions, and I hope that the Minister will provide us with the answers today.

I wonder whether, when the Department noticed that the winning tender bypassed three of the prioritised areas — including Newry, the North's fourth largest city — the Department took any steps to discuss the fact that Hibernia Atlantic's tender diverged greatly from DETI's stated policy. If it did notice that, what action did the Department take?

There is huge frustration in the Newry and Mourne area at the way in which DETI handled Project Kelvin. The same was true in Derry, but the situation there has been rectified. That has not been the case for Newry. DETI has effectively washed its hands of the matter, insisting that it is now the responsibility of the private sector. As I said, I wonder where that leaves DETI's policy of prioritising certain areas. Such a response from the Department, which has ignored its stated policies in awarding contracts, is completely unacceptable.

DETI clearly had influence over the location of points of presence, and the Department must bear responsibility for the situation that Newry now faces in respect of Project Kelvin. It is time for the Department to live up to its responsibilities. DETI must take steps to ensure that Newry receives a point of presence sooner rather than later — within the next year. We need guarantees from the Department that Newry will receive the same pricing and service guarantees that exist at other points of presence.

The Minister will probably say that the economic and employment situation in Newry has improved greatly over the past 15 years, and I agree with that. However, that improvement has largely taken place as a result of the efforts of the community in Newry. The city's business and commercial community has worked hard and successfully to improve the economic situation there.

When we compare levels of government investment in Newry with other comparable centres in the North, it is clear that there has not been overinvestment in Newry. In fact, the opposite is true. We were used to that sort of treatment under the old Stormont regime, but we expect better under the present Administration. As I said, it is time for DETI to hold up its hands and admit to the errors that it made in respect of Newry in the awarding of the contract. It is not good enough for the Department to wash its hands of the matter. It is time for it to take positive action by linking Newry into Project Kelvin.

Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you very much for the opportunity to discuss the issue. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I thank the Minister for her presence here today. The initial reaction of people in Newry to Project Kelvin was to note that Newry was excluded, whereas Armagh, Monaghan and Dundalk were included. It appears that DETI tendered for provision for Derry and Belfast, but, as far as I am aware, the provider was willing to include other areas.

4.30 pm

Newry is a city of ambitions, and Project Kelvin is very much seen as an integral part of continuing to promote those ambitions. Contained within those ambitions is the Newry digital city strategy for the twenty-first century, in which innovative ideas, such as using the Newry Canal as a digital conduit for cables, have been mooted. The advent of Project Kelvin would enable Newry to have an all-encompassing strategy, a partnership with businesses and a partnership with projects such as neighbourhood renewal. That would make the technology available to businesses, but also to areas of low income, enabling many young people to realise their career choices and giving them the

proper tools with which to further their ambitions. For example, if there is a realignment of sterling with the euro this year, approximately 3,000 retail jobs will be at possible risk, and, therefore, alternatives have to be looked at. Project Kelvin will also help improve rural connectivity and open up opportunities for small businesses in rural areas.

It should be recognised that, in some areas, Newry leads the way in the North. For example, First Derivatives in Newry provides high-end ICT for the financial services industry and is seen very much as a leader in that sector. The provision of better and improved technology would also help companies such as Teleperformance to develop a better competitive edge and to tender for bigger contracts. Those are just two examples of Newry's contribution to the local economy.

Suppliers are currently in the process of identifying locations in Newry for Project Kelvin points of presence. Research will also be carried out in relation to best practice and how towns and cities across Europe have benefited from investment in communications infrastructure.

Finally, I commend Newry Chamber of Commerce for the great work that it has done in progressing the project. Newry and Mourne District Council, and individuals from the business sector, also deserve praise and recognition.

Project Kelvin can only be beneficial for our area, and it will enable Newry to continue to become a thriving commercial centre and an example to other areas throughout the North. My colleague Conor Murphy has been involved in the project from day one in our constituency, and he will give the House a much more detailed update.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank Dominic for bringing Project Kelvin to the attention of the Assembly. Reference has been made to the constituency that the project affects, and I should explain that part of the city of Newry is in my constituency of South Down.

In Dominic's address, he said that Newry had been ignored, for whatever reason. Since the mid-1920s, as Dominic mentioned, Newry was repeatedly ignored by successive Governments, and everyone knew the reason for that. Thanks to the private sector, Newry has come on in leaps and bounds, and has become an ever-growing hub on the new corridor between Dublin and Belfast. That infrastructure will soon be complete, and Newry will be only an hour away from Dublin and less than an hour away from Belfast, making it an ideal place to set up a business. That includes modern businesses such as IT and communication businesses, which is why Project Kelvin is so important.

Last week, I attended a meeting of the Greater Newry Vision Partnership at Warrenpoint Harbour

Authority, and Project Kelvin was on the agenda. A lot of concern was expressed that Newry was being ignored, and the group proposed to take that matter further, as has the Newry Chamber of Commerce. All that that group is looking for is economic justice from an enterprise, trade and investment perspective. I am pleased to pass that message on to the Minister, and I thank her for her attendance.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I agree that Project Kelvin should, as part of its remit, hook up with Newry. In many ways, at the beginning of the debate about the project, much of the attention was focused on where the telehouse would be and less on the route that it would take throughout the North and the South.

The case for Newry was very ably made by people in the Newry area, where business, particularly that involving IT firms, has thrived over the past number of years. The case for Newry's connection was well made, and it was recognised as an area that needed particular attention.

Therefore, when it was first brought to my attention that Newry was not connected to the network for Project Kelvin, I was disappointed. I immediately met with people in the business and IT sectors in Newry to discuss that. As other Members have outlined, those people were very keen to ensure that Newry would not lose out on the benefits of such a high-speed internet connection to North America. They felt that it being connected to the network would be very beneficial in selling Newry as a destination for inward investment and in expanding the growing indigenous business in Newry that is reliant on that type of provision. There was a strong sense that Newry wanted to get active, as Newry always does, and to make sure that it did not lack the benefits that other towns would receive from being connected.

After that discussion with the representatives of the business and IT sectors in Newry, I raised the issue at a meeting with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster, and the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment in the South, Mary Coughlan, because the project was a North/South one. At that meeting, we ascertained that the northern aspect of the project was under the authority of DETI. Consequently, I arranged for the representatives from Newry to go to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's (DETI) headquarters to meet the Minister and her senior officials and discuss how best Newry could become part of Project Kelvin or, at the very least, tap into the same network at the same time.

The discussions have developed from there, and, although there is a very strong sense of disappointment that Newry was not part of the original project, the campaign has led to those involved in the IT sector in

Newry, in both the public and private sectors, and those in the Newry Chamber of Commerce and Trade getting together. Those people have formed a digital group for Newry, which looks at what the area needs, so that the business and public sectors can co-ordinate their approaches and ensure that they are lobbying in the right areas. To that end, the group has secured money from the council and the private sector.

Discussions are ongoing. I have been part of discussions with Hibernia Atlantic, the provider of the service, that were held in Newry. I also met Hibernia Atlantic bosses in the States to ensure that Newry has the right type of connection. There are different types of connection, and we want to ensure that Newry receives the full benefits that are accrued under Project Kelvin. Those discussions are continuing, and I have asked the Minister about support from her officials in making sure that Newry receives its proper provision.

There is a feeling that Newry is entitled to proper provision, but people will not just sit back and make demands of the Department. People are getting together to ensure that we identify what is required for Newry; that there is agreement on what is required; and that we go, as required, to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and to the providers. We also want to ensure that Newry is well placed in the future to be properly connected to the networks and ensure that we can take full advantage of the benefits that Project Kelvin delivers.

It is unfortunate that we were not involved in Project Kelvin as of right. That was overlooked by the Department —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Murphy: My time is limited. If I am allowed to finish my remarks, I am happy to give way.

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member agree that we need assurances that Newry will receive the same pricing and servicing guarantees that exist in other points of presence?

Mr Murphy: It is important that Newry receives assurances that it can get into the network on the same basis as everywhere else. That is what I have been working for over the course of possibly a dozen meetings since the issue was first brought to my attention. I am happy to update the Member on the progress that has taken place. The campaign has encouraged businesses and those involved in IT in Newry, in both the public and private sectors, to get together to identify what Newry needs, clearly present that case and ensure that Newry receives that to which it is entitled. I will continue to work with that group and support it in that endeavour.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I am always happy to come to the

Chamber and discuss DETI provision. However, I will not listen to outlandish nonsense, which is, frankly, some of what we got from the Member who secured the Adjournment debate.

I am very disappointed that the debate began in that way. Today, I wanted to outline what is going on in Newry, why there is no need for a point of presence there to obtain the specific speeds that are required, the other work that is going on in Newry and the fact that Newry, from a telecoms point of view, is on the corridor between Belfast and Dublin that has better telecoms infrastructure than anywhere in Northern Ireland. That is one of the reasons why companies such as First Derivatives and Teleperformance use Newry; the skills, people and telecoms infrastructure are available there. I was disappointed at the tone at the start of the debate. However, that tone improved when other Members contributed.

It is important that the investment —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I will give way only if the Member offers a constructive point that adds to the debate.

Mr D Bradley: Businesses that provide IT services in Newry are not happy with the existing level of IT support there. For example, the exchange in Newry does not have the technology to support a 20 megabyte broadband line for high-speed linkages. The current maximum is 6 to 8 megabytes; it should be 20 to 24 megabytes. That assertion is from the minutes of a meeting that I had with a business that is involved in IT. Therefore, there seems to be variance between what businesses are saying and what the Minister is telling us today.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

I am happy to discuss that matter: it is one reason why the Department has invested a huge amount of money in next generation broadband. Newry and Armagh, and the whole of Northern Ireland, will benefit from next generation broadband. That is why such a fundamental announcement was made towards the end of last year.

However, I will return to Project Kelvin. As the Member knows, the issue in Londonderry was not about anything other than the fact that the city wanted a telehouse as opposed to a point of presence. As I said during discussions on that matter, it is important not to squander an investment of that magnitude and nature. We need to consider the benefits in Northern Ireland. As I discovered during a conversation with the chief executive of BT about next generation broadband and how it will roll out across Northern Ireland, we have a better telecoms infrastructure than a lot of European countries. However, today we are talking down what should be a good news story for Northern Ireland.

A lot of effort has been put into Project Kelvin, and the Northern Ireland Science Park recently held a good event that discussed monetising Project Kelvin and what the project could do for the whole of Northern Ireland, not only the areas with the points of presence. Members should obtain details of that event and consider those for the future.

I have received some correspondence from stakeholder groups in Newry, and I have had a productive meeting with Minister Murphy about the project. Two key issues have arisen: the Department's role in specifying where particular investment should take place; and the opportunities for businesses to exploit the opportunities that Project Kelvin presents. In order to address the first matter, it is critical to provide some background on the telecommunications market in the United Kingdom. It is a fully privatised market and is independently regulated at a national level by Ofcom. Moreover, it is largely a reserved matter. My Department has a general power under the Communications Act 2003 to make investments to stimulate the local market.

A lot has been made about the eight locations in Northern Ireland that will be points of presence at which customers can access services under the project. That has generated a lot of misinformation and many misunderstandings. I want to discuss some of those issues in the Chamber today; most notably that having a point of presence creates a competitive advantage over locations that do not have a point of presence.

That is simply not the case, and certainly not in Newry, given the broadband speeds that are available in the city compared with broadband speeds in other places. It has also led to demands that my Department should specify additional locations to Hibernia Atlantic.

4.45 pm

I want to be very clear about those matters. Points of presence are automated, unmanned facilities that house telecoms equipment so that other carriers such as BT and Eircom can interconnect to the Kelvin link. Those carriers will provide the physical connections to customers. Project Kelvin's focus is on telecoms infrastructure. In those terms, Newry is in no way deprived, because all the main telecoms companies have good quality infrastructure in the area. In addition, Atlas Communications has a high-speed 100 megabits broadband connection that passes through the Newry area. Newry was not excluded and it can connect to Kelvin through the existing local infrastructure. Any business that requires access to Kelvin, regardless of location in Northern Ireland, can do so through the local carriers.

I want to say something about broadband speed. The current telecoms infrastructure in the Newry area is

strong and can deliver the same speed as the Kelvin terrestrial networks. A specific point of presence would not increase speeds, given that businesses will have to use the local telecoms network to make connections between Kelvin and their premises. I want to say that clearly, because certain Members are saying things that are not correct.

We have heard a lot about the tender process and the contract today. It is correct to say that there were three mandatory points of presence, only one of which was in Northern Ireland. The rationale for specifying that Londonderry should be one of those mandatory points was established in the initial feasibility study that demonstrated that companies in the north-west faced significant adverse disparities in costs of international data transfer. In other words, the data came to Dublin but took a disproportionately long time to get to Londonderry. People in Newry cannot say that that is the case for them.

As part of the procurement process, bidders were invited to specify locations where they might be prepared to establish additional points of presence. Hibernia Atlantic specified seven additional locations in Northern Ireland based on their assessment of commercial opportunity. The decision was also influenced by the need to provide service to two mandatory locations in the Republic of Ireland, in Letterkenny and Monaghan.

I need to say that at no time did DETI play any part with Hibernia Atlantic in making the decisions on the number of locations or additional points of presence. Otherwise, why would Enniskillen not be on the map? The position of my Department and the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in the Republic of Ireland is quite clear. Project Kelvin is a €30 million investment that covers 13 points of presence only. We have no plans to develop further points of presence by varying the terms of the contract. The Governments of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have made a substantial investment in Project Kelvin, and any decisions on establishing further access points will be a matter for the private sector service providers.

Those decisions are based largely on demand and the demonstration of sustainable commercial business cases. That is an important point that I hope will not be missed. In short, the ball is in Newry's court now. Contrary to what has been said, my Department takes a great deal of interest in what happens in the Newry area. I have visited the city on many occasions to make announcements about new jobs, and I commend the enterprising nature of Newry Chamber of Commerce and Trade and businesses in that city for the positive work that they are doing to promote business development.

We can say that the glass is half-full: that Newry has a good deal better infrastructure than many places in Northern Ireland and has the same broadband speeds as many of the points of presence; or we can say that it is half-empty, and because it does not have a point of presence it will not get any new international investment. I say to those Members here present, would it not be much better to take the former route and try to sell Newry in a positive way throughout the world? When they do so, they will not find me wanting in helping them to do it.

Adjourned at 4.50 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 25 January 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

New Assembly Members: Mr Conall McDevitt and Mr Jonathan Bell

Mr Speaker: I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Mr Conall McDevitt has been returned as a Member for the South Belfast constituency to fill the vacancy resulting from the resignation of Mrs Carmel Hanna and that Mr Jonathan Bell has been returned as a Member for the Strangford constituency to fill the vacancy resulting from the resignation of Mrs Iris Robinson.

Mr McDevitt signed the Roll of Membership in my presence and that of the Clerk to the Assembly/ Director General in the Speaker's Office on Thursday 21 January 2010. Mr Bell signed the Roll of Membership earlier today. Both Members have entered their designations and have now taken their seats.

Assembly Commission

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the Assembly that a vacancy exists on the Assembly Commission.

As with other similar motions, the motion to appoint a Member to fill that vacancy will be treated as a business motion, and, therefore, there will be no debate. Before I proceed to the Question, I advise Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That, in accordance with Standing Order 79(4), Mr Alex Attwood be appointed to fill a vacancy on the Assembly Commission —
[Mr P Ramsey.]

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Economic Development Policy

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that she wishes to make a statement.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I wish to make a statement on how I propose to take forward economic development policy in Northern Ireland. My decisions are based on the independent review of economic policy, the outcome of the consultation exercise on that review and my discussions with key stakeholders on the report and its recommendations.

As Members will be aware, I commissioned the independent review in December 2008. Its overarching aim was to assess the policy of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and Invest NI to determine whether it was sufficient to help to deliver the productivity goal contained in the Programme for Government. In light of that, I asked for a root and branch review of economic development policy. I am grateful to the panel for its report, which was published on 29 September 2009, and for its detailed and wide-ranging recommendations.

Given the strategic importance of the review, not least because the economy is the Executive's top priority, I issued the report for a short six-week period of public consultation, which ended on 16 November 2009. I am grateful to the 69 respondents, and, as part of today's statement, I will publish a consultation report containing a summary of what was said during the consultation and provide access to the more detailed responses. Those responses added to the review and helped to shape the actions that I will outline.

Aside from responding to the recommendations, which I will detail shortly, I must say that the timing of the report is of immense significance. It comes at a time when we are working to rebuild the local economy, which, in common with that of other parts of the United Kingdom and beyond, has suffered and continues to suffer as a result of the global downturn. Since December 2008, the number of unemployment claimants has increased by almost 18,000, and many businesses have been forced to cut back or cease operations. Compared with the previous year, those factors contributed to a 63% increase in the number of redundancies notified to my Department. Moreover, the construction sector has been significantly hit by the downturn, and there have also been marked declines over the year in the output of other sectors, including manufacturing and services.

I welcome the fact that many economic commentators are beginning to forecast some improvements in the

local, national and global economies in 2010. There are some signs that the impact of the downturn may be starting to ease in Northern Ireland. For example, the latest increase in the claimant count is significantly below the average monthly increase experienced over the past year. As we work to implement the findings of the review, my aim is to improve further the prospects for economic growth and higher living standards throughout Northern Ireland.

Turning to the independent review, I warmly welcome the report and its recommendations. The report recognises the need to provide short-term support for companies along the lines of what we have been doing to ease pressures resulting from the recession. However, for the medium to long term, the review also endorses the policy ambitions of the Executive, namely to build a more value-added and productive economy. As I will describe later, many of the recommendations will be implemented by my Department and Invest NI as soon as practicable. Others, by their very nature, will require further analysis and discussion, which is to be expected given the strategic nature and importance of the issues that they cover.

A vital aspect of the review is that it clearly states that efforts to raise living standards and productivity in Northern Ireland cannot lie solely at the door of DETI or Invest NI. Other Departments also have important roles to play, particularly in terms of skills, planning and investment in infrastructure. Furthermore, as the review highlights, it is ultimately the responsibility of companies in the private sector to invest in areas such as skills, exports, R&D and innovation to boost competitiveness. I will return to how I intend to handle the cross-departmental proposals later in my statement.

Notwithstanding those issues, the report of Professor Barnett and his colleagues represents a significant piece of work that will help to shape economic development policy in Northern Ireland, particularly as we enter the new decade with its challenges and opportunities. Today's statement outlines my position on the recommendations, and I have asked my Department's permanent secretary to establish, with immediate effect, a steering group to implement the actions that I wish to take forward.

The group will include representatives from Invest Northern Ireland, and I will look to the group to report regularly to me on progress towards implementation. To add a degree of independence, Dr Ian McMorris, who is an independent board member of my Department, and Dr Bill McGinnis, who is the Northern Ireland skills adviser, have agreed to join the steering group. They will each add an important external voice, particularly in respect of their considerable experience in the business community.

The steering group will be supported by four implementation groups, which will be chaired at a senior

level and will include, where appropriate, officials from other Executive Departments. Each of those groups will oversee the implementation of recommendations that fall within the areas of the co-ordination of economic policy in Northern Ireland; DETI and Invest Northern Ireland's assistance to industry; autonomy, flexibility and decision-making; and policy development and monitoring.

I will now outline my response to the major recommendations of the independent report, and I will do so in the four areas that I have just mentioned. I will begin with some comments on the recommendations that were made on strengthening the co-ordination of economic policy in Northern Ireland. The most significant is that the core economic functions that cover existing DETI and Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) areas of responsibility should be brought together under a single Department of the economy. As I have mentioned previously in this House, that is something that I support strongly. It is imperative that we work to reduce the number of Government Departments in Northern Ireland, and the rationale for bringing together the responsibilities of DETI and DEL is very strong and clear. Without doubt, skills are a critical factor in economic development, not just for businesses locally but as a means of attracting value-added and internationally mobile companies to locate and develop their business operations here in Northern Ireland.

Of course, DETI and DEL already work together closely in order to align policy and match the demand and supply of skills. That has been acknowledged in the report, but the panel has stated rightly that we can and should go further. It has argued that bringing together the responsibilities under a single Department would ensure the maximum possible flexibility and responsiveness to business needs, both for local companies and to attract and retain international businesses.

As I have indicated, the merits of the proposal are very clear. I support the recommendation to create a Department that has a much broader policy remit than either DETI or DEL. However, as I indicated earlier, a number of the panel's recommendations will inevitably require further analysis and discussion. In some instances, they will also require agreement with Executive colleagues. This is clearly one such recommendation. Therefore, I have today issued a paper to my Executive colleagues seeking their agreement to consider the creation of a Department of the economy as part of the planned review of strand-one institutions. However, I also recognise fully, as the review panel did, that getting agreement and implementing new departmental structures is something that presents its own challenges and will inevitably take some time. That is why I also advocate in the Executive paper that we take the interim steps that were suggested by the panel to improve the structures that are currently in place.

Central to that is the establishment of a subcommittee of the Executive to prioritise cross-departmental action on the economy and to address not only the recommendations that fall to my Department but those that cover issues such as skills, planning and infrastructure. I welcome the proposals that Minister Poots put forward as part of his Executive paper on planning reform. I welcome particularly the fact that a number of the proposals in the Executive paper on planning are aligned with the recommendations that were made in the independent report.

In reaching Executive agreement on the establishment of a subcommittee, it will, of course, be imperative that we are clear on its membership and remit, and discussions will need to be held about those matters. However, while recognising that developing the economy cuts across all Departments, I envisage that, initially, the subcommittee should comprise Ministers who are currently responsible for the delivery of the Programme for Government goal of improving private sector productivity. That embraces DETI, DEL, and the Department for Regional Development (DRD), but it should also include the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), given their central role. I expect that other Ministers will be involved as specific issues arise.

12.15 pm

The panel suggested that the subcommittee should take forward the development of an economic strategy for Northern Ireland that builds on the findings of the review. Given that Northern Ireland is a small region, we should work to produce a single overarching economic strategy that aligns with and helps to shape other Executive strategies. It is vital to have that strategy in place to grow the economy as Northern Ireland emerges from the recession to ensure that we are able to compete more effectively, regionally and globally and to help to prioritise resources. I further suggest that such a new economic strategy should be at the heart of the next Programme for Government. Therefore, my paper to the Executive proposes that the subcommittee should begin to work on the development of an economic strategy, which should be completed well before the end of this calendar year in time to inform the Executive's next Programme for Government and Budget, which will take effect from April 2011.

I look forward to discussing those important issues with my Executive colleagues and to agreeing on how we take them forward as a matter of urgency. I stress that I am not relying solely on the new measures that I have outlined. To that end, I today welcome two important and significant initiatives on skills. First, as part of the incentive to attract new investments and expansions in Northern Ireland, DEL and Invest Northern Ireland will take forward a pilot project designed to

offer an assured provision of a skilled workforce tailored to companies' specific needs, based on a successful model of support in North Carolina. The details will soon be announced by the Minister for Employment and Learning. Secondly, DEL and Invest Northern Ireland are collaborating in the development of an integrated framework for management and leadership to improve support in that important area, as highlighted in the independent report.

Members are also aware that the independent panel made recommendations about how we might better tailor the assistance that DETI and Invest Northern Ireland offer business. Before I turn to those recommendations, I will touch briefly on the range of businesses that we assist.

The review panel highlighted a concern that Invest Northern Ireland support is not available for a large section of businesses in Northern Ireland that fail to meet eligibility criteria. In particular, it has been recommended that the concept of Invest Northern Ireland "clients" should be removed to allow Invest Northern Ireland to work through the entire business base to provide support for innovation, research and development, and export growth.

In reflecting on that recommendation, I acknowledge that Invest Northern Ireland currently supports the wider business base through many initiatives, including export programmes, which are available to any company in Northern Ireland that wishes to explore new markets; new schemes, such as innovation vouchers and the growth programme, which target small and micro businesses; advisory support, such as the credit crunch initiatives that I launched in 2008; and, of course, nibusinessinfo.co.uk, an online business advice service.

It is important to recognise the need to maintain an ongoing relationship with businesses in which many of our investments span a number of years. It is also imperative that Invest NI can fully monitor the performance of individual companies through the various stages of financial assistance. In that light, I have asked Invest NI's chief executive to review how the organisation could develop a tiered portfolio of support across the wider business base to accelerate innovation and export growth. As part of that review, I have also asked for the development of a small business unit to be considered. It could fit within the model to provide a more dedicated resource to supporting small businesses throughout Northern Ireland, in particular to open up supply chain opportunities similar to those that have already been developed for the aerospace sector. Invest NI will bring forward its proposals by September 2010.

An important aspect of the review will be to examine how small business support is co-ordinated with district councils in the context of the review of public

administration. It is evident today that, although I am keen that support be offered as widely as possible, it must be stressed that we are in a much tighter public expenditure environment than we have ever been before. That inevitably means that difficult decisions must be taken to prioritise our limited resources in favour of businesses and projects that offer the greatest potential for raising living standards and private sector productivity in Northern Ireland. In doing so, we must focus on projects that offer the greatest return to the economy.

It is important to recognise the fact that support is not just about financial assistance. The companies that I meet often comment on the real benefit of the practical, advisory help that they receive from Invest NI on a diverse range of issues, such as researching new markets, intellectual property or the strategic direction of a business.

That leads me to comment on the assistance that DETI and Invest NI provide to industry. A fundamental issue at the heart of the independent report is the view that there needs to be an accelerated shift towards support for innovation and R&D from employment-based schemes, such as selective financial assistance (SFA). First, the report highlights the very real prospect that regional aid limits for the support that we offer to projects through SFA will be reduced significantly. That process has already started, and we will see major changes from the end of 2010. Secondly, the panel drew on a substantial body of evidence that suggests that innovation should be considered as the primary productivity driver for a regional economy such as Northern Ireland. In particular, innovation is critical if local firms are to maintain and improve their competitiveness in export markets. Together, those factors provide both a push and a pull in the direction of increasing support for innovation and R&D. I fully accept that analysis, and, indeed, it must be recognised that, in recent years, Invest NI has already taken action to skew more resources towards innovation and R&D support.

For example, the independent panel acknowledged that, in 2008-09, compared with the previous six-year period, assistance for innovation and R&D increased by 20% in real terms. In the current financial year, that level of assistance accelerated as a result of Invest NI increasing its budget allocation for innovation and R&D by a further 30%, which represents a shift of more than 60% in the past two years. Expenditure on innovation and R&D now accounts for 38% of programme spend. I have asked my officials to continue to look for ways to maintain that trend.

The independent panel made a number of specific recommendations in relation to the portfolio of innovation policies and support programmes that are currently on offer. In particular, the panel suggested that the innovation system in Finland is an example of best practice and

should be explored further. My Department has already started a thorough and comprehensive review of best practice in economic development policy in other small, open economies throughout the world, including Finland, aimed at identifying transferrable lessons for Northern Ireland. The report on that work is due in late spring, and it will be used to inform the development of future policies and programmes.

The independent panel further recommended that additional support for innovation and R&D should not involve new public expenditure. Instead, it should be financed from savings in other areas, particularly grant support, in respect of which there were concerns about the low value-added nature of some of the projects that were supported, and, most notably, business expansions, in which there was lower additionality in certain areas.

That touches on the key issue of DETI and Invest NI assistance to industry. I shall, therefore, highlight a number of points on the use of financial assistance. First, I repeat my firm belief that there is no evidence in the report that resources have been wasted. Indeed, the review panel recognised that Invest NI has made a significant contribution to economic and employment growth in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the panel reported that, per capita, Northern Ireland has the most successful record in the UK for attracting foreign direct investment.

Secondly, the review report makes specific recommendations about the assistance that is offered to business expansion projects. However, it is important to recognise the realities of business investment, whereby companies often test the market with an initial investment before building an operation to a critical mass using a series of subsequent investments, often by adding new and other mobile functions. On occasion, those subsequent investments may require support from Invest NI.

Thirdly, the panel rightly recognised that we are entering a period when the availability of public expenditure is tightening and, against that backdrop, it did not wish to present a set of proposals that would, unrealistically, require significant sums of additional moneys. However, in recognising that reality, it is also important to reassure Members about the existence of the industrial development guarantee, which is designed to ensure:

“that no worthwhile proposal for eligible support to investment in industry or tradable service will be lost”.

As I mentioned earlier, we are entering a new policy framework in which changes to state-aid limits from the end of this calendar year mean that, going forward, we will not be able to support business using SFA in either the way that we have done to date or to the same extent. Therefore, we must look to increase support for

businesses using other existing or newly developed instruments.

The critical issue is how we should be deploying SFA now and in the run up to 2013 when we may lose it as a policy instrument. My view is that we should continue to use SFA for as long as we can, particularly as we seek to rebuild the economy in the aftermath of the recession. However, going forward in non-recessionary years, we also need to consider how we best deploy SFA effectively to improve productivity. That was a key point in the report. My view is that SFA should be used in the future to support investment in indigenous companies and to help to attract new and potential follow-on investments to Northern Ireland. That must be the key to improving relative living standards here.

I accept that it is a challenging area and one on which there are a number of views. During the consultation process, concerns were raised, principally from business organisations, about increasing the level of support for innovation and R&D at the expense of SFA. In that light, I have asked the implementation group covering DETI and Invest Northern Ireland assistance to industry to bring forward recommendations on when and where we should be using SFA. That could potentially involve setting higher job-quality thresholds than those that are currently in place. It may also improve supporting certain strategically important projects and those that are in areas of particular economic need. However, I stress that given the nature of our work, where multi-year financial support packages are agreed with businesses, it should be recognised that there will be limited scope to change Invest NI spending in 2010-11. It is, therefore, about preparing for change for the new Programme for Government period starting in 2011-12, although we will, of course, need to ensure that we are careful not to take any actions now or to enter into new commitments that would unduly compromise our room to manoeuvre in the future.

Moreover, looking forward to 2013, with the very real prospect of significant reductions to regional aid, I reassure Members that I and my Executive colleagues will be doing all that we can to secure the best deal for Northern Ireland. I have, therefore, asked my officials to begin preparing a case with other relevant bodies to seek to maximise state-aid cover for any future SFA-type programmes post-December 2013 and for other programmes that are designed to support business competitiveness, particularly in the areas of innovation and R&D.

My comments so far have focused on SFA. That is appropriate, given that the programme accounts for around 40% of Invest NI support and given that it was also the subject of much of the panel's analysis. However, Invest Northern Ireland also offers a wide range of other programmes to assist businesses; indeed, the

independent report also commented on those. In fact, the report suggests that Invest Northern Ireland's offering is unnecessarily complex, and it proposes that the number of programmes be reduced. I know that Invest Northern Ireland has made good progress in rationalising its programmes, but I believe that further progress could be made. Therefore, I have asked the chief executive of Invest Northern Ireland to review the number and breadth of Invest NI programmes with a view to producing a consolidated suite of offerings in a business-friendly format that will support the growth of export and innovation in Northern Ireland businesses. I have asked Invest NI to complete the review by June 2010.

The panel also commented on Invest NI export assistance, suggesting the adoption of a more professional and fee-charging model. Entering new markets outside Northern Ireland is an important way for local businesses to realise their growth potential. I have seen at first hand the real value that Northern Ireland companies get when they take part in market visits, and I am encouraged that Invest Northern Ireland is committed to further developing its export assistance.

Obviously, the merits of the proposal need to be given more detailed consideration, and, when introducing or revising any fee-changing structure, we need to be careful to ensure that it does not become prohibitive. However, I am aware that Invest NI has already carried out some work in this area and will be bringing forward new proposals in March 2010 for the next financial year.

12.30 pm

Furthermore, the Department had already planned to evaluate Invest NI's export assistance. Work is due to be completed towards the end of 2010. Clearly, the implementation group that covers DETI and Invest NI assistance will need to reflect on the findings of the evaluation when it becomes available to ensure that we offer the best-quality exporting support to Northern Ireland's businesses.

The review panel also made proposals on assistance for training; financing of businesses; industrial land provision; exploiting telecommunications infrastructure; and the social economy.

The review panel recommended that Invest Northern Ireland should further reduce its support for company training and concentrate support mainly to small firms and projects with a high innovative content. Unsurprisingly, concern was expressed, principally from business organisations, about the impact of that recommendation. I understand that evidence that underpins that recommendation was drawn from an evaluation of the company development programme, which has been superseded by the business improvement training programme. That new programme is the subject of an evaluation that is scheduled for completion

by autumn 2010. That will help to inform company training.

As regards financing of businesses, I recognise that high-growth businesses are a key driver of economic growth, not only because they develop themselves and generate significant employment growth but because their dynamism stimulates competition and innovation throughout the economy as a whole. In many instances, equity funding is the most appropriate type of financing for such companies. Recent evaluations demonstrate that an equity gap still persists in Northern Ireland, particularly covering the seed, early, and development stages for deals of up to £2 million. Therefore, my view is that Invest Northern Ireland continues to intervene to support development of the venture capital market in Northern Ireland.

Today is not the time to respond in specific detail to the full list of recommendations. However, my position on all of them and, indeed, on all the other proposals that are contained in the independent report are set out in the detailed paper that I have included with my statement.

The third area on which the panel made recommendations was autonomy, flexibility and decision-making. The panel's review of global best practice suggested that successful development agencies benefit from having freedom to operate in a way that allows them to be entrepreneurial and responsive to business needs. I fully support that sentiment.

Indeed, a key element of the original rationale behind the establishment of Invest NI in 2002 was the desire to create a development agency that was more businesslike in its operations. However, a criticism that is often levelled at DETI and Invest Northern Ireland is that the governance system remains too complex and time-consuming and that that impedes Invest Northern Ireland's responsiveness.

I can indicate to Members that my officials have already held discussions with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) to explore how current delegated limits might be extended. I have asked that the relevant implementation group conclude on that issue as soon as possible. My aim is to try to establish new departmental governance arrangements by April 2010.

Furthermore, where major projects require DETI and DFP approval, I accept the panel's recommendation that those cases should be considered in parallel by a central project review group. Again, I have asked that officials from my Department and DFP agree the mechanisms that need to be established for that group to be operational from April 2010.

The panel's report also contains a number of recommendations that relate to the organisation of Invest Northern Ireland. In accepting the principle of greater autonomy, those are, for the most part, internal

issues for the agency to consider. I have asked Invest NI's chief executive to reflect on those recommendations and to advise the implementation group of any steps that he plans to take. That will cover areas such as the structure of Invest NI and training of its staff.

Finally, with regard to decision-making, the independent report recommended that all ex post assessments of value for money should be taken on a portfolio basis. I support that strongly. My long-held view is that we must manage risk better. However, in doing so, we cannot afford to be risk-averse. I have asked the permanent secretary in my Department to engage with DFP and the Northern Ireland Audit Office to explore how best that balance can be struck in practice.

Before I conclude, I turn to the independent panel's recommendations on the roles of DETI and Invest NI in policy development and performance monitoring. I agree that it is right that the Department have lead responsibility for policy development and performance monitoring and that it is important to have appropriate resources in place to deliver that.

The permanent secretary has begun to review the DETI structures, and I have asked him to look for ways to strengthen the Department's policy analysis and development function. The panel also recommended that DETI should assume responsibility for reporting on Invest NI's performance, and I can confirm that that will be the case for the next Invest NI performance report, which will be published at the end of the current corporate plan period. I can also confirm that Invest NI's operating plan for 2010-11 will include targets specifically for investments new to Northern Ireland, as per the panel's recommendation.

I also agree that it is important that my senior officials and I have access to top quality and timely economic and business advice. The panel has made a number of recommendations in that regard, particularly in relation to the future of the Economic Development Forum (EDF).

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

Since its establishment in 1999, the forum has played a very important role in advising on the direction of economic development in Northern Ireland. During my tenure as chairperson, I have found the engagement with members to be beneficial. Of particular benefit is the work that has been undertaken by the forum's subgroups on various issues, including recent work on such areas as the economic downturn, manufacturing and exports. However, as Members will be aware, the review panel suggested that the current mechanism for the delivery of independent economic advice, through the EDF, was not optimal. A recommendation was made to stand down the forum and replace it with a new, smaller advisory unit, comprising representatives

from the business and economics sectors. In making that recommendation, the panel also stressed the importance of continuing to engage with stakeholders on a bilateral basis.

I have given those recommendations very serious consideration, and I believe that the time is right to change the way in which I receive independent advice on the economy. I have, therefore, written to EDF members advising them that the forum will be stood down and replaced with a new advisory unit, which is to be established by April 2010. That unit will include representatives from Invest NI and the business, skills and economics sectors. The unit will also address a further recommendation that was made by the panel, namely the appointment of an independent economic adviser. I will continue to meet with stakeholders on the economy, bilaterally, as and when necessary.

In conclusion, I have set out my position on the independent report and the steps that I plan to take to promote economic development in Northern Ireland. There is no doubting the fact that the challenges are even greater now, given the impact of the recession on the Northern Ireland economy. Invest Northern Ireland uses the appropriate phrase, “Building locally, competing globally”. The course that I have outlined today will help Invest NI continue to do that in order to strengthen our competitive position — regionally and globally.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr A Maginness): I welcome the Minister’s detailed statement on Professor Barnett’s report. The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, in general terms, supports the Minister’s position. I particularly welcome two things. First, I welcome her intention to set up an implementation group. I hope that that group will produce an operational plan as soon as possible so that the report can be implemented as quickly as possible. Secondly, I welcome the Minister’s intention to pursue the establishment of an Executive subcommittee for economic policy, which is important in light of our present economic difficulties.

With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, may I say that Invest Northern Ireland should be given as much freedom as it can to get on with the job of regenerating our economy? I believe that the Minister is dedicated to that. Will the Minister assure the House that she will do all that she can to bring about a more flexible, robust and independent Invest Northern Ireland to deal with the specific difficulties of our economy and the development of a robust and worthwhile economy in the future?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Chairperson for his comments and for highlighting the implementation group, the Executive subcommittee and the issue of more flexibility for Invest Northern Ireland.

I want to make the purpose of the implementation group very clear. Along with my statement, Members will have received my responses to each of the recommendations. The recommendations have all been answered with regard to whether we agree or disagree with them, and we disagree with a very small proportion, as we agree with most of Professor Barnett’s report. However, I recognise that some proposals will take longer to implement than others. Therefore, to ensure that they are implemented in a timely fashion, I felt that there was a need for the implementation group, which will report to me directly, and I can ask it how the implementation is going. The Member is right to point out the importance of the implementation group in ensuring that we do not lose the momentum of what we have achieved so far with regard to the Barnett report.

The Executive subcommittee is also a key factor. If the current recession teaches us anything, it teaches us that it is felt right across Government and not just in one Department. If we develop an economic strategy in that way, we will get buy-in from the other Departments, and it will not be seen as being in a departmental silo, as it never should have been in the first place.

More flexibility for Invest Northern Ireland is also a key factor. Invest Northern Ireland was set up in 2002 with the aim of being flexible, so that it could meet the needs of business in a more meaningful way than that which Government could achieve directly. This approach is a way of doing that, and it will allow Invest Northern Ireland to become even more flexible and fleet of foot. There is a need to get answers quickly in today’s business world.

I recognise that we are dealing with public money and, therefore, we have to strike a balance between having the flexibility that I want for Invest Northern Ireland and, at the same time, taking account of the use of the large amounts of money that the Government instruct us to look after. There has been ongoing good engagement with the Department of Finance and Personnel, and we will be able to deal with that issue quickly. By April this year, those issues should be dealt with, and we will then be able to move forward.

Mr Campbell: I warmly welcome the Minister’s statement. It is unfortunate that a significant section of the press draws massive attention to an issue over which we do not currently have any control, while matters such as this, over which we do have control and which could make a significant difference to the wider population, do not attract the same attention.

The Minister has outlined comprehensively her suggestions for a new Department of the economy that would be sufficiently flexible to offer the skills training that is needed in the downturn — a need that we have seen, unfortunately, in some of our constituencies, for example, in Limavady, where 1,000 people lost their

jobs in one go — and the flexibility of introducing help and assistance for the small-business sector in times of recovery. What would be the dramatic difference between any new Department of the economy and what we have at present?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

It is fair to say the Department for Learning and Employment (DEL), DETI and Invest NI are working well together. However, a new Department would allow us to align our policies more closely and to take action quickly when necessary. Although I have put in place various measures to help to deal with the current economic downturn, such as the credit-crunch seminars or the short-term assistance scheme, Sir Reg Empey introduced a programme for skills, and those two schemes would have had more of an impact had we been able to wrap them together and deliver them from one Department. Moving forward and having a single Department of the economy would send out a clear message to other Administrations that we see the economy at the top of the Programme for Government and that we want to drive it ahead.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I also welcome the Minister's statement to the House today. My two questions follow on from what Gregory Campbell said about reassuring the business community. A potential merger between the Minister's Department and the Department for Employment and Learning was mentioned. In the interim, will the Minister ensure that economic policy is kept in line and that it will go hand in hand with a skills and training strategy to meet the future needs of businesses?

12.45 pm

Invest NI has accepted the need for performance measures, but there does not seem to be much evidence that it is an ongoing feature of its work. At the end of her statement to the House, the Minister said that her Department would take on that responsibility, but will Invest NI continue to analyse performance measures and assess how far it has gone in attracting business? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: The answer to the Member's last question is yes, absolutely. In my statement, I said that specific targets will be included in the new operating plan for Invest Northern Ireland. That will allow the Department to determine whether those targets have been met, and it will help to counter some of the allegations that are made against Invest Northern Ireland, which bear no relation to what I see on the ground. As my Department does not currently have such a responsibility, it is unable to produce a report. That change will add significantly to future transparency and openness.

In the interim, and as I said in response to a question from the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the subcommittee on the economy will be crucial in tying up the skills agenda with my Department's agenda. All large companies, whether indigenous or new foreign companies, want to be assured that the appropriate skills base is available here for any business expansion they wish to take forward. To my knowledge, to date no company has been unable to expand or invest in Northern Ireland because of a lack of appropriate skills, and we must ensure that that continues to be the case.

Mr Cree: I also thank the Minister for her thorough and detailed statement to the House. I have two questions, the first of which relates to the proposed phasing out of support for business expansion. Will that action place Northern Ireland at a competitive disadvantage in attempting to attract inward investment and be to the detriment of future growth?

Secondly, businesses and trade unions disagreed with the panel's view that high energy costs have been addressed, and they suggested that more action is needed to bring down relative energy prices in Northern Ireland. Does the Minister share that view?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Conflicting evidence was heard on financial assistance. Professor Barnett felt that there was a need to move away from that quite quickly and to support research and development and innovation instead. However, in his original report to me he stated that:

"the severity of the ongoing recession highlights an important policy consideration, namely that financial assistance to industry will vary depending on the economic cycle."

We must take into account the short-term difficulties that we face and retain all of the tools, including selective financial assistance, that are available to us. Why should we throw away that tool when other regions of the United Kingdom are retaining it? I understand the panel's point about research and development, and we are keen to move into that area in the medium to longer term. In the shorter term, however, DETI and Invest Northern Ireland must take cognisance of the fact that we are in the midst of an economic downturn.

As a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Member will also be aware that money has already been indicatively offered for 2010-11 and that the financial assistance that has already been offered to companies cannot be removed simply to satisfy the report. The retention of selective financial assistance (SFA) is the right way to proceed in the shorter term. It will be up to the implementation group to consider whether SFA should be used in the future when, for example, companies offer jobs of higher value. There is a lot of work to be carried out in that area.

In relation to the Member's second point about high energy costs, regrettably, a lot of large business users have seen an increase in their energy bills, particularly over the last couple of months. The Member will be aware that the Utility Regulator is carrying out a review into energy costs. I met the regulator briefly just last week to establish how that review is going, and at that meeting it was indicated that all the energy companies have been working very closely with the regulator and that the review is being carried out as expeditiously as possible. I know that the cost of energy is a big worry for a lot of large firms here, and the Member has my commitment that we will do everything that we can to deal with those issues.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for her statement and for the speed with which she and her Department dealt with Professor Barnett's report. That report states that Invest Northern Ireland should concentrate more on small firms and projects with high innovative content. Does the Minister believe that the small business unit that she proposes to establish will deal with that?

In her speech the Minister said that the new economic strategy will form the heart of the next Programme for Government. Surely something can be done within the present Programme for Government to deal with the issues that have been raised.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member will know that a lot of small businesses have for many years expressed the opinion that Invest Northern Ireland was not for them. Today, I have tried to highlight the fact that Invest NI actually did work with small businesses — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: However, there is a need to be more focused in helping our small businesses. The Member will know that our economy overwhelmingly consists of small and micro businesses.

I looked closely at what had happened in the aerospace industry. I know that it is a very specific sector, but that sector has been able to operate with a supply chain that works, involving companies such as Bombardier right down to small precision engineering companies that may have a couple of people working for them. Instead of having a large business unit and a small business unit, I want to see an integrated approach to business right across Northern Ireland, so that businesses in a particular sector can work through that sector without being labelled as a small business and not really being an Invest NI client. It is right to move away from Invest NI client status to a more integrated approach for small businesses.

In relation to the Member's second point, I referred to the economic strategy forming part of our Programme for Government in the next term. It is

absolutely key that we do that, but I hope that the Member can take from the rest of today's statement that I do not want to sit around and wait until then to move the economy forward. I have set out a number of ways that we can move forward quickly. I hope that the delegated limits and all the initiatives to make Invest NI more flexible will be in place by April 2010. Programmes have already been rationalised; I think immediately of the grant for R&D and the way in which it rationalised all the research and development programmes. A lot of practical work will happen before then, but I do realise that money has been committed for 2010-11. We are setting the economic strategy for the medium to longer term while dealing with the short-term challenges that are before us now in the most effective way that we can.

Mr Moutray: Like others, I welcome the fact that the Minister has brought this important and timely statement to the House so speedily. Will the Minister indicate whether the role of the Invest NI board will change as a result of her statement?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The members of the Invest NI board have worked very well together. The board provides a good challenge to the work of Invest NI and its chief executive. It has always fulfilled an important role in the work of Invest NI; for example, it sits on the case-work committees and helps to fulfil a challenge role. However, the precise role and remit of the board will be reviewed in the context of dealing with the revision of delegated limits. I have already said that I hope that that piece of work will be completed by April 2010.

Therefore, a slight change may be made to the role of the Invest Northern Ireland board. I thank the people who sit on the Invest Northern Ireland board, many of whom run successful businesses. They give much of their time and energy to Invest Northern Ireland. I pay tribute to the public service that they contribute to Northern Ireland, and I hope that they continue to provide that service.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Minister for her statement. She said that today is not the day for her to respond to questions on specific details in the recommendations. However, I am disappointed that, when she mentioned that the report says that there is no evidence of resources having been wasted, she did not take the opportunity to demonstrate that the political will exists to develop and grow the social economy sector and to recognise the contribution of that sector to the economy and to the creation of employment in areas of disadvantage and need. Will the Minister recommend that adequate financial investment be given to the social economy sector to enable it to develop and grow?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member has asked me questions about the social

economy before, and it is important to recognise the role that that sector plays in Northern Ireland. When many other parts of the economy were not growing, the social economy grew, and I appreciate the work that is carried out in the sector.

I take issue with the Member's mention of money being wasted. The report recognises that Invest Northern Ireland has made a significant contribution to economic growth and growth in employment in Northern Ireland. At the time of the Barnett report's publication, scare stories, hype and noise were going around about money that had been wasted. The evidence of that is simply not there, and I urge people to reread the Barnett report on that issue.

The Member mentioned the need to deal with regional disparity. I asked that the report address that issue, and it does so. It says that companies should be allowed the scope to locate where they can operate most profitably. For external investors with increasingly tradable services, that means — unfortunately for me and my constituency — locating in large urban areas. I urge people to look at what the report has tried to do; it has tried to bring a step change to the Northern Ireland economy. That is what it is about, and it provides a good basis for moving forward.

Mr Hamilton: I will resist the temptation to engage in a discussion on the impact that regional disparity has on the Strangford constituency. The Minister talked about a consolidated suite of programmes. Can she outline what those programmes might be and any rationalisation that has taken place already?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I have already referred to the fact that Invest Northern Ireland has looked at its suite of programmes and decided to rationalise in the research and development field. In December 2008, I launched the grant for R&D, which brought together all of the R&D and innovation programmes and allowed a single application to take place. That allows companies not to waste time giving consideration to what is the most appropriate programme for them to apply to but allows them to apply and get through the process more quickly. Business groups have told me that they found that that worked well, and they hoped that that would happen with other Invest NI programmes.

Mr McFarland: I thank the Minister for the report and for her courage in pushing through much-needed reform to our economic policy. Many local authorities have expressed concern that Invest Northern Ireland has bought up property in prime locations that has not then been used and is denied to other businesses. Is the Minister minded to review Invest Northern Ireland's operation of its property strategy?

1.00 pm

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I accept what the Member said. Paragraph 3.29 of the analysis of responses to the consultation exercise states that:

“Many local councils expressed their concern that Invest NI had purchased property in prime locations to hold for clients, which has then remained vacant and prevented other businesses from using the land.”

I presume that that is what the Member was referring to. However, contrary to that, a number of councils indicated that they would like Invest Northern Ireland to purchase more land as a means of attracting investment to their areas. Therefore, there are conflicting views on that issue.

It is important to look at our land acquisition strategy. The Member is right about that. An evaluation of Land and Property Services is under way, and I am due to receive a report on that in spring 2010. I hope that that means March 2010 as opposed to later in spring 2010 — I think that it does. That report will then go to the implementation group to take the matter forward. As I said, there are conflicting messages about the land acquisition strategy, and clarification is required.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for her extensive reply to the report on the independent review of economic policy.

Although it may not have been specifically mentioned in the report, the Minister mentioned some fairly radical changes, including a closer relationship between DETI and DEL. However, it strikes me — we have discussed this before — that the missing link is a functioning postgraduate business school in Belfast that would embrace components of the universities. Has the Minister considered that as part of the radical restructuring, or has it been put on the long finger?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Member for his question. It is not a matter of me putting it on the long finger. The Member is right that that specific issue was not addressed in the Barnett report. The review was, from a strategic point of view, more about considering the need for a Department of the economy. At present, such issues reside with my Executive colleague Sir Reg Empey and are to do with the skills and training agendas. However, I am happy to pass on the Member's comments to my colleague and, indeed, have a discussion with him about that issue.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for her statement. I know that many businesses across Northern Ireland will support the establishment of a Department of the economy. Will Invest Northern Ireland continue to offer financial support to relatively low-paid tradable service projects, including call centres?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The key to all this is that Barnett was considering selective financial assistance in the medium to longer term. I made that clear today. I said that there was a push and a pull factor. There is a need to do that because we want to progress Northern Ireland through research and development. I nearly said *Vorsprung durch Technik*; I was thinking of that old Audi ad.

At the other end of the scale, Europe is looking at us and saying that regional aid may come to an end in 2013. Therefore, there is a need to consider the whole issue of selective financial assistance. However, given that we are in the midst of a recession, in the shorter term, we need all the tools that are available to us. Therefore, given the present circumstances, I firmly believe that selective financial assistance should remain available to us.

A lot of FDI companies come to Northern Ireland and initially place perhaps 15 to 20 employees here, do some research and development and, by doing so, attain Invest Northern Ireland's support. However, 75% of those companies then invest for a second time, and they grow what they have in Northern Ireland. It would be a retrograde step if we were not able to assist such firms with greater expansion in Northern Ireland. It would be detrimental to the economy. Therefore, I firmly believe that we may need to keep SFA available to us in the short term.

Mr O'Loan: I commend the Minister for what she is trying to do. I agree with her that simplistic criticisms about wasted millions or billions do not make any useful contribution to improvement. The amalgamation of DEL and DETI is an interesting proposal. That would be a major change, the full implications of which would have to be thought through, including how it might be done.

Will the Minister reconcile the need for innovation and sharp focus in the support systems for business with her very complex statement, which included a large number of specific initiatives? We want to encourage innovation and sharp focus in the business community. If they are not present in the support mechanisms, they will not be encouraged in that community.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

I am not sure that I follow the Member. Is he asking whether there is a need to rationalise Invest NI programmes? That is certainly what we will do. I have asked the chief executive to bring forward that review to the date specified in my statement; I cannot recall that date just now. There is a pressing need to crunch down on the myriad of programmes available. It is too much to expect managers of small businesses to go through them all and see which ones apply to them. If

the Member is asking whether I am talking about rationalisation, the answer is that I am.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her lengthy statement, which lasted 40 minutes. At one stage, I was going to pass her my throat lozenges to help massage and soothe her throat.

We are clearly in an economic recession — I hate to use those words — and jobs are being lost. Will the Minister confirm that it is right to continue to focus on improving productivity?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

I thank the Member for his *ex post facto* sympathy. I did not see any sweets coming forward as I read my statement.

It is right that we continue to focus on productivity, particularly in the medium to longer term. If we want to produce a step change in Northern Ireland's economy, we must focus on it. However, Barnett and his colleagues on the review team recognised that there was a need to take the current economic cycle into account, and I have already referred to that in comments addressed to another Member. We must recognise where we are at the moment. Everything I have said about selective financial assistance should be understood in that context, and I know that the Member appreciates that.

Mr McHugh: Thank you, a *LeasCheann Comhairle*.

Almost every aspect of the Minister's statement has been covered, but there was a lot in it. I welcome the statement and the Minister's intent to look at Invest NI's delivery and try to leave us in a more competitive situation worldwide. It is important that industries become more R&D-focused to allow us to stay in the high salary bracket. We have to approach the problem from that angle.

My question has a local focus, and the Minister is aware of my position. We are moving forward to a new position and taking the new approach of R&D and innovation. Will the new Department reposition, and will mindsets change? All the innovations may take place, but it seems from all the Minister's answers that the Department is still adopting a Belfast-only position.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

I do not know how the Member infers that we have a Belfast-only position. No one can accuse me of looking solely at Belfast in anything that is done in relation to DETI's policies. The Member knows that only too well, as Fermanagh will be the recipient of much telecommunications infrastructure in the near future. Advancing innovation and research and development can help any number of firms, regardless of location or size. With our excellent and growing telecommunications infrastructure, I envisage that

many firms across the country will take advantage of research and development and innovation assistance.

Research and development and innovation are not just about people wearing white coats; they are about new products, developments and processes, in whatever sector people work. I urge the Member not to see bogeymen where none exists and instead to work through the process and grasp what we are trying to do for the whole economy. Let me be clear: this is about the whole Northern Ireland economy, certainly not just about Belfast.

Dr Farry: The Minister has said that there is no waste in Invest Northern Ireland. Does she draw a distinction between waste and inefficiency, bearing in mind that, relative to other jurisdictions and compared with other inward investments, our job creation costs are high? Does she think that opportunity costs will arise from that?

The Minister also spoke about the importance of dealing with the current economic cycle. I had hoped that the report would have looked more to the future by focusing on restructuring the economy. Will the Minister speculate on how the recommendations will contribute to addressing the structural difficulties in the economy, which has a high dependency on the public sector, and the low level of productivity?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I will answer the last question first. The report is about a new economic focus for Northern Ireland by moving forward with higher productivity. That is why we are examining research and development and innovation, and it is why we are encouraging more private sector companies to be export-focused. We have seen many companies become more export-focused out of necessity over the past 18 months, and we want to support those companies in moving forward. Many smaller firms have grown from family structures, and they, therefore, do not have the necessary management structures to move ahead and make a difference through productivity.

Dr Farry also raised the issue of waste. I understand his point about additionality and about SFA having a lower additionality for research and development. However, when I visit different locations around the country for job opportunities, very few MLAs say to me that they do not want Invest Northern Ireland to give those companies assistance because they are providing low-value jobs. Members have choices to make. If they do not want Invest Northern Ireland to become involved in the so-called call centre phenomenon, much more work remains to be done to get foreign direct investment of that nature into Northern Ireland, because many of the firms that currently come here receive assistance from Invest Northern Ireland. Therefore, we have big choices to

make about the sort of economy that we want for Northern Ireland. For my part, I want an innovative economy that is based on research and development. I have seen the difference that research and development has made to the economies of countries such as Israel, and I think that it can do the same for our economy and do it very well.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an tuairisc seo a chur faoi bhráid an Tionóil inniu. Tá ceist agam ar an Aire faoi fhorbairt eacnamaíoch ar bhonn fo-réigiúnach.

Will the Minister assure the House that future economic development policy will ensure that subregional disparities will be addressed through the use of Invest Northern Ireland resources to produce a more balanced programme of economic growth throughout the North?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As I said in response to a question about regional disparity from Ms McCann of West Belfast, I specifically asked the Barnett review group to consider regional disparity. It has said that companies should be allowed the scope to locate their premises wherever they feel that they can operate most profitably. That in itself presents a challenge for MLAs, because they must consider what they can give to their regions to mark them as out areas where companies will want to invest.

Through its regional offices, Invest Northern Ireland will continue to work with all the companies that come to it for assistance. In fact, given that Invest Northern Ireland's client status will now go into the history books, many companies have the opportunity to move forward in partnership with Invest Northern Ireland and put themselves on the map, whether it be in research and development and innovation or in new export markets.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for her lengthy statement. Paragraph 90 states that the permanent secretary will engage with the Audit Office to present a balanced way forward. Will the Minister assure us that the independence of the Audit Office will not be undermined in any way and that it will continue to evaluate the work of all Departments to ensure that taxpayers' money is accounted for in every way?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am not responsible for the Audit Office, and I think that it would take unkindly to the suggestion that a conversation with my permanent secretary would, in some way, damage its independence.

I have long said that, if we want Invest Northern Ireland to manage its risk better, there must be an understanding across the Chamber, the press and the Audit Office about what we are trying to achieve, and that is the reason for the engagement between the

permanent secretary and the Audit Office. We are trying to achieve a situation in which that body can act more flexibly when faced with entrepreneurial business people. However, in doing so, that body must recognise that it is dealing with public money. That is why I asked my permanent secretary to have discussions with the Audit Office. I am quite sure that the Audit Office will remain independent at all times.

1.15 pm

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Standing Committee Membership: Assembly and Executive Review Committee

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

Resolved:

That Mr Declan O'Loan be appointed as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. — [*Mr P Ramsey.*]

Statutory Committee Membership: Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

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

Resolved:

That Mr Conall McDevitt be appointed as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. — [*Mr P Ramsey.*]

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Universities: Protestant Students

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 Easton: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to bring forward measures to ensure that more students from a Protestant background are encouraged to opt for universities in Northern Ireland as their first choice.

The motion concerns what must be one of the most critical matters for education in our time and, if we fail to act, an issue that has long-term consequences for Northern Ireland and its economy. I refer, of course, to the number of Protestant students attending universities in Northern Ireland. The issue is not being raised to upset any political party or to attack the Minister. I hope that the debate will be taken in the spirit in which it is intended, which is to raise awareness and, hopefully, to address the serious situation before us.

Such a serious problem in our education system demands an urgent response from the Minister for Employment and Learning. The motion tells the Minister of the necessity for a strategic course of action that can realistically tackle, through a step-by-step approach, the serious imbalance in the number of Protestant students attending universities in Northern Ireland. The motion asks the Minister to go beyond a matter-of-fact response, because a deadpan restatement of the status quo is inadequate to current needs. There is restlessness in the Protestant community, and we need accountability and real answers from the Minister on how we are going to tackle the serious problem of low numbers of Protestant students attending Northern Ireland universities.

The challenge for our universities is to look to their figures, which have alerted us to the fact that Protestant students are not opting for those institutions as their first choice, and to ask why that is. Set against the background of the variety of choices that other parts of the United Kingdom offer, we would be pleased to see Northern Ireland universities encouraging Protestant students to elect them as their first choice. Let us take action to make Northern Ireland universities, which are a valuable resource, the first option and best alternative from what is available.

Given the scary statistics, which I will present, a valiant effort is required from the Minister and our universities to address the raw fact of the low number of Protestant students attending our universities. The

Minister will understand that we have to chivvy him along on that matter. I will set out evidence detailing the imbalance in the number of Protestant students and demonstrate to the House why it is necessary to bring forward measures for Northern Ireland universities to attract more Protestant students.

I will lay out the cold, clinical statistics on the state which we are currently in. For instance, at Queen's University in 2007 and 2008, there were 6,735 people from a Protestant background and 8,245 from the Roman Catholic community. At the Magee campus of the University of Ulster, 530 students were from the Protestant community, and 2,090 students were from the Roman Catholic community. At the Belfast campus of the University of Ulster, 450 students were from the Protestant community, and 545 students were from a Roman Catholic background. At the Jordanstown campus of the University of Ulster, 3,685 students were from the Protestant community, and 6,105 students were from the Roman Catholic community. At St Mary's University College, 10 students were from a Protestant background, and 910 students were from the Roman Catholic community. The statistics also show that students from a Roman Catholic background receive more information on funding than those from the Protestant community: 69% to 55%.

The Equality Commission published an expert paper titled 'Educational Migration and Non-Return in Northern Ireland'. That paper highlighted the stark fact that students from the Protestant community are more likely than their counterparts from the Roman Catholic community to migrate from Northern Ireland to Great Britain for higher education and stay without returning. Those are not my words but words used in the expert report, the findings of which will shock all right-thinking people.

Let me go further and look at the 2005-06 period, in which some 2,736 school leavers were tracked. A staggering 29% of our students migrated to Great Britain in that period, and Protestant school leavers were 11% more likely to migrate to study in GB than their Roman Catholic counterparts.

Although statistics can be dry, the following should excite and animate the House to action: two thirds of Northern Ireland school leavers who studied in Great Britain did not return to Northern Ireland in the short to medium term. An examination of community backgrounds shows the reality that more Roman Catholics studied in Northern Ireland than Protestants: 77% to 66%.

The picture becomes bleaker still when it is realised that, in absolute terms, 59% of all school leavers — 3,852 — are from a Roman Catholic background while those from a Protestant background make up 36%. I put it to the Minister that, despite increasing enrolment

to the Northern Ireland institutions, the proportion of Roman Catholic students to Protestant students in our universities has not changed for a number of years. When I refer to the Protestant exodus from our universities, the word "exodus" refers to the departure or, as some may rightly say, exit of Protestants from Northern Ireland universities and, indeed, Northern Ireland in the short to medium term.

The facts that I have outlined speak for themselves and ask the Minister why Protestant students are retreating from the courses available in our Northern Ireland universities. What do we need to do at home to ensure that our Protestant students do not withdraw and take flight to GB universities? How can we ensure that they do not refrain from going to university? Having established that there is a problem, let us apply ourselves in a hopeful way to the measures that the Minister needs to take to tackle it.

Dr Farry: Will the Member clarify why, as a self-proclaimed unionist, he views a person from Northern Ireland who wishes to study in another part of the United Kingdom as any more of a problem than someone from London who wishes to study in Newcastle?

Mr Easton: If the Member had been listening properly, he would have heard me say that people have the right to go to whatever university they want to. I am complaining about the lack of Protestants attending universities in Northern Ireland.

No longer is it acceptable to export our home-grown talent or not to take measures to encourage attendance at our universities. No longer will we stand idly by while our society and our economy suffer from a lack of Protestant students.

I challenge the universities to conduct detailed research into why Protestant students are looking elsewhere for their education or are not going to university at all. They should apply their brains and resources to the problem and produce an action plan on how to address the issue. That action plan should be able to be audited for success.

In the past, Protestant students found the atmosphere at universities here to be that of a cold house, and that encouraged them to look elsewhere. Terrorism also played a significant part in that, but thankfully we have moved on from the evil and ultimate futility of that, so let us try to ensure that the cold house is a thing of the past.

Research also informs us that teachers are a key influence in assisting and guiding students on where they undertake their studies. Should we look to teacher training and see how, as a key influence in providing guidance, teachers can promote and sell the benefits of what we have here?

I will return briefly to the circumstances or, more accurately, the plight of Stranmillis University College. Will the Minister give his detailed attention to Stranmillis and reprioritise so that its future can be taken into account? That future has a direct correlation to the future availability of places at an institution that has attracted high-quality students. Such reprioritisation should involve educating students here so that society in Northern Ireland can benefit. In many ways, Stranmillis has bucked the trend and helped to prevent the further deterioration of the already critical and severe calamity of a Protestant student exodus. However, even here we see changes, and the proposed merger of Stranmillis and Queen's may make the situation even worse.

The Minister must address himself to the access and equality issue. In fact, a significant 14.1% of Protestants acknowledge and have the limited perception that St Mary's is not welcoming to people from their community, whereas only 3.1% of the Roman Catholic community perceive that Stranmillis is not welcoming to them. If the Minister were to adopt an ostrich approach to Stranmillis's plight by sticking his head in the sand and letting it be, the Protestant student numbers would only be distressed further. That prospect is too awful to contemplate.

It is vital to tackle and stop the discrimination against Protestants that the Catholic certificate of education causes. The Catholic Church and the Minister have a duty to end that discrimination against Protestant student teachers. In order to address the unfair advantage that the Catholic certificate of education offers, dare I suggest that we do away with that certificate or create a controlled sector certificate to correct that imbalance?

The evidence base highlights the quality and quantity of what we can offer students. We must realise that students are in the marketplace. Are courses elsewhere in GB more attractive? If so, why? Given that the Internet has been identified as the key source of information to potential student applicants, should universities in Northern Ireland use the Internet more to promote themselves? Should we set targets for our universities so that the serious imbalance in student numbers can be corrected? Furthermore, researchers have said that government should do more to encourage Protestant students to apply and must take action to inform Protestant students of the financial support that is available to them.

The deteriorating situation for Protestants in our secondary schools compared with their Catholic counterparts merits further attention and the creation of an adequately resourced action plan. We must reverse the laissez-faire approach that allows proportionately fewer Protestant students from secondary education to progress to further education and university.

I have laid out in stark terms the position that we are in.

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

Mr Easton: Nothing less than a robust action plan with built-in criteria is required to address the serious imbalance in numbers.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Member who moved the motion raised a number of issues. I agree on one point: there is a need for an action plan but not one that is based on this motion. I will elaborate on that.

I am disappointed that we did not have this debate in October. At that time, I was interested to hear the Minister's views. In fairness to the Minister — I welcome him to the debate — I had the opportunity to read his press release, and it is important that we read some of it into the record. The press release gave a number of figures stating that we are losing fewer students today than 20 years ago. It also gave a breakdown of Protestant and Catholic numbers. Moreover, it showed that, in general, it is likely that more students from a Catholic tradition leave the North to study in the South or in Britain.

In saying that, I do not want to get into the issue of Protestant and Catholic numbers. There is a problem with student numbers from poor, working-class areas and with the number of women students. When talking about personal choice, we must realise that people choose to study in universities in Asia, America, England, Scotland or the Twenty-six Counties for a number of reasons. We should not, on the one hand, tell students that the world is their oyster but, on the other hand, criticise them for studying elsewhere to find the best education. Personal choice must be taken into consideration. The other reality is that some people do not achieve the relevant qualifications to study at our top-class institutions here, and others just want to see a bit of the world.

The research documents that the Member who moved the motion mentioned are very important.

It is important to note that the Equality Commission's research showed that more Catholics than Protestants — 40% and 34% respectively — went on to higher education. However, that research also stated:

"This was influenced by a number of factors, including ... aspirations and culture."

That is the key to the issue. We need to examine that research; that is where the action plan comes in.

1.30 pm

The Equality Commission's research also suggested that:

"there may be cultural barriers to continuing in education facing boys from poorer Protestant communities ... many disadvantaged

Protestant communities were still adjusting to the fact that there were no longer the same opportunities available to school leavers" and

"that there was less support from parents ... regarding continuing their education."

That is also a key factor. Fifteen or 20 years ago, boys from Protestant communities always had a job waiting for them. We must change the mindset of people from poorer working-class areas. We also need to consider the gender issue; the percentage of girls going on to university was much higher than that for boys, and that is before we even consider the numbers of Catholic girls and Protestant girls. We must tackle that issue.

I am conscious that we should not highlight figures when the statistics show that they are not true and that the situation has improved in recent years. I am keen to hear what the Minister says. However, if we are going to draw up an action plan, let us examine why more women than men and more people from affluent areas are going on to further and higher education. Let us ensure that people who want to go on to further and higher education have equality of opportunity and access.

Alex Easton will have gathered that we will oppose the motion. It does not make sense, and the figures do not add up. If he is going to quote research, he must be careful about what comes after it. It is all right to quote figures, but the research shows that there are issues in Protestant communities that prevent boys in particular from going on to further and higher education.

Mr McClarty: It is important to begin by stating that it is a fundamental right of all students to choose freely where they go to study. In a liberal democracy, it is not for the state to dictate where people should study. It is certainly not the role of a Department to take steps to ensure that students do not leave their region.

It is, of course, for a Government to create the conditions whereby people do not want to leave, but that is a very different prospect indeed. The Government should ensure that the quality of education in Northern Ireland is such that no one who wants to stay is forced to leave. The Government should also ensure that there are sufficient jobs in a range of sectors and at a range of levels so that no one is forced to leave for work purposes.

Very few students are forced to leave Northern Ireland. Veterinary medicine is one of the few subjects for which Northern Ireland cannot cater. However, in virtually the entire spectrum of subjects, Queen's University and the University of Ulster have the capacity and quality of provision to cater for any school leaver in Northern Ireland who wants to stay here. The vast majority of school leavers who go to the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain or further afield are

doing so because they are determined to do so. That is their right.

Many students leave for lifestyle reasons, simply because they want a change and the independence that moving away from Northern Ireland brings. Are we really saying to those people that that option should not be open to them? We must also remember that there are educational reasons why people may want to move. Queen's University and the University of Ulster are excellent institutions, and in fields such as medicine and law they are among the best in the United Kingdom. However, universities such as Cambridge, Oxford and Trinity College Dublin provide a tremendous draw for some of our brightest students; indeed, some Members have those institutions as their alma mater. Are we really to close that avenue to our brightest students?

The number of Protestant and Catholic students who leave Northern Ireland is roughly equal. The brain drain exists to some extent, but the Minister is addressing that through the "Come on Over" campaign. However, it is not true to say that there is a sectarian problem or that it is more of an issue for Protestants than for anyone else.

We must, therefore, put more effort into making Northern Ireland an attractive place for business. We must grow the private sector and provide a wider range of opportunities in Northern Ireland for our graduates, so that those who do leave for universities in other places have the opportunity to come back. That is the real issue, and that is what I want to be addressed.

Mr P Ramsey: In the lead-up to the debate, the SDLP gave careful consideration to any qualitative or quantitative evidence that would support the motion. Unfortunately, insufficient evidence exists to enable us to support it.

Going by comments made by some unionist representatives to the media, the motion seems to be predicated on the argument that there is a chill factor for Protestant students. We are not convinced that that is the case or that more Protestants migrate than any other group. Our assertion is, however, that more investment is required to increase the number of student places here and stop the overall brain drain from Northern Ireland. I will deal with those three points in turn, starting with the chill factor argument.

As a social democrat, if there was a chill factor for Protestants or any other group in society, I would be concerned, and my party and I would demand that action be taken. When I discussed claims about the chill factor with those in university management, they strenuously made the point that their organisations are professional, inclusive and diverse. Their universities are internationally renowned institutions that do not tolerate sectarianism, and they reject any claim to the contrary. I also met Protestant students in my constituency

and officials from the students' union, and they also reject any such claim.

In addition, I know of no rigorous study that shows that there is a chill factor. The Osborne study into secondary school leavers found that only about 2% of respondents felt that they would feel uncomfortable in a particular institution for religious reasons.

To provide confidence in that regard, and I say this in good faith to the Member who proposed the motion, I am prepared to request that Sir Graeme Davies, as part of his review of higher education, include a study on the question of a chill factor for any group in our universities. I will do that with the support of the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Minister's endorsement.

I take on board the point made by the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning about the attitude of young men differing from their female counterparts. There are several reasons for the migration of students and the historical religious imbalance. The University of Ulster's seven-year review states:

"Those who obtained their university education elsewhere may be broadly divided into two groups of roughly equal size. Firstly, there were the so-called 'determined leavers': in the main they had very good A-level results, came from the larger Protestant grammar schools and from better-off families, and proceeded to the older universities in Scotland and northern England. The second group were commonly characterised as 'reluctant leavers': they had lower A-level results, were evenly divided between the two communities in Northern Ireland, and tended to go to the post-1992 universities in Britain. A key factor in regard to this second group was that the points scores required for entry to the University of Ulster (And Queen's) were significantly higher than those required by comparable institutions. The net outcome of the situation was that most emigrants were Protestants and that both universities in Northern Ireland had a clear majority of Catholic students."

On the second point, I would like to deal with the migration figures. In October 2009, the Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey, said that:

"The total numbers of school leavers from Protestant and Catholic communities leaving to study in Great Britain are very similar. In 2006-07 there were 1,137 Protestant and 1,105 Catholic school leavers and in 2007-08 there were 1,142 Protestant and 1,060 Catholic school leavers choosing to study at GB universities. If we examine the total number of Northern Ireland domiciled students studying in Republic of Ireland and Great Britain, it is likely that there are now more students from a Catholic background, rather than a Protestant background, choosing to study outside Northern Ireland."

A fair analysis of the studies from which I have quoted and other studies would be that Protestants from higher-income backgrounds and grammar schools choose universities in Britain because they see it as a matter of aspiration and perceived quality. They also see Britain and Scotland in particular as natural places to move to.

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

Mr P Ramsey: Catholics are more likely to opt to go to universities in Northern Ireland. We should not suggest that students should not opt for universities outside Northern Ireland. It is a personal and family choice.

Ms Lo: The Alliance Party opposes the motion. We believe that it has a sectarian undertone that we cannot support. All our young people, regardless of community background or social class, should be encouraged to go to further or higher education colleges to reach their full educational potential here or elsewhere if they so wish. However, we acknowledge the need to enable Protestant working class pupils to achieve better in school.

We do not believe that the motion stands up to scrutiny. The figures, which some Members have quoted, speak for themselves. The total number of school leavers from the two major sections of our community who go to study in Great Britain are very similar. In 2007-08, 1,142 Protestant compared with 1,060 Catholic school leavers chose to leave to study in Great Britain. There is very little difference. As Sue Ramsey said, if one were to add to those figures the number of students going to the Republic of Ireland to study, it is likely that there are now more young people from a Catholic rather than a Protestant background leaving Northern Ireland to study elsewhere.

The motion also mentions choice. It is a matter of personal choice for the undergraduate to select the university in which they want to study, depending on that institution's reputation. We in Northern Ireland produce a large number of high flyers each year who achieve outstanding results at GCSE and A level. There is nothing wrong with their wanting to choose the top universities in the UK or the Republic of Ireland.

Although our home-grown universities offer quality teaching, Queen's University ranked only forty-second in the 'Sunday Times' university league table, and the University of Ulster was a few places behind at fifty-fifth place. One may argue the merits of such tables, but teachers and parents take notice of them. If your son or daughter finds themselves armed with four A grades at A level, should they not aspire to spend three or more wonderful years at Oxford, Cambridge, University of London or other institutions of a similar standing in our neighbouring jurisdictions? I am the proud mother of two sons who benefited from an excellent education in England, each attending the top university for their degree course.

Alternatively, those who do not make the grade to go to Queen's University or the University of Ulster, which have only 40,000 places between them, have to

go somewhere else. What is the problem with that? Let us not be so parochial.

Mr Easton: Will the Member give way?

Ms Lo: No, I am sorry.

We should be grateful that our students have so many options compared with students from other countries. After all, it is not a bad thing for a young person to leave Northern Ireland to live in societies that are more tolerant, diverse and progressive than ours. It will open their minds.

1.45 pm

We need to make Northern Ireland an attractive place that will entice people back once they have graduated. We need to be able to offer them a shared and better future in a place where there are job opportunities and where they can enjoy a quality lifestyle, free from instability, bigotry, segregation and division. I still hope that my two sons will return some day.

Mr Craig: I support the motion, and I look forward to addressing the issues that it raises. Although I agree fully with the argument about choice, we cannot ignore the fact that two thirds of students who leave Northern Ireland do not return in the short to medium term. Three quarters of those who choose to study at higher education institutions on the mainland are Protestants, whereas more Catholics opt to stay in Northern Ireland. There is no getting away from the religious imbalance in the make-up of the student populations at both Queen's University and the University of Ulster, where I studied.

It is vital that we try to retain students in Northern Ireland, not only for our education system. Something is driving Protestants away from universities in Northern Ireland. We can stick our heads in the sand and ignore that issue if we want to. Indeed, I get the distinct feeling that that is what is going to happen today. However, there is a religious imbalance. There is a lot of talk about equality in the Chamber, but where is the equality of choice for students here today, especially those from a Protestant or unionist background? Are those students really welcome in universities in Northern Ireland?

It is a long time since I was at university; it is 25 years, in fact. However, I know from my own experience that it was a cold house for anyone from a unionist background. The year before I started studying at Jordanstown — it later became the University of Ulster — members of our security forces were murdered in the vicinity. Unionists did not raise their heads above the parapet; if they did, they would have had them shot off, literally.

I agree with other Members, including the Minister, who said that things have moved on politically and socially since that period. However, we need to address

certain issues to correct the religious and political imbalance in the numbers who attend Northern Ireland universities. What is driving students away? What makes them more willing to go to the mainland? Is it all down to choice? Why do more unionists, or pro-British people, choose to go to universities in England, Scotland or Wales, or, as was mentioned, to the very good universities in Dublin? I suggest that there is more to it than choice.

Students have approached me to point out the imbalance in the teaching in our universities. For example, why has there been a long series of lectures on history from a nationalist perspective at Queen's? Why was the system not balanced to reflect the unionist tradition in Northern Ireland? It is divisive that not one of that series of 10 history lectures at Queen's reflected the unionist background. It creates the impression that students from a Protestant or unionist background are not wanted at that university and that their history does not count. We need to address the culture that has developed in our universities. I appeal to the Minister to examine those issues to see what is making our universities cold houses for Protestants and unionists.

Mr Leonard: Does the Member accept that he is possibly accusing some very professional people of creating an imbalance? Unionist advisers have taught in universities and continue to do so. There have been examples of university lecturers saying that collusion should not be talked about because it did not exist. Does the Member realise that there are two sides to the argument, and that he may well be engaging in quite a lot of professional negativism?

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

Mr Craig: I find the comments from our friend about collusion interesting. I was taught Irish history at school from a nationalist and a unionist background. The choice of what one believed was left up to the individual. I suggest that that is part of the problem in our universities. Students are given a one-sided story and one opinion. The opinions of people from a unionist background do not seem to count any longer. Until those issues are addressed, there is nothing to attract Protestants and unionists to our universities in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, the religious imbalance in our universities in Northern Ireland will continue to grow.

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

Mr Craig: I support the motion.

Mr Butler: It is unfortunate that the motion asks the Minister to take measures to attract students of one particular background. The motion reflects more the state of unionism rather than what the Minister can do.

There is no question about it: we live in a divided society. Our kids are educated separately in primary and post-primary schools. When the University of Ulster was created, it was located in Coleraine rather than Derry. We had all sorts of problems at Queen's University with the flying of the Union Jack, the anthem and fair employment. Even the very backgrounds of our universities ran along religious and political lines.

I think that one of the Minister's statements referred to the piece of research that was done by Professor Osborne. The issue of why the majority of students at the University of Ulster and Queen's University are Catholic is much more complex than the DUP is trying to portray it as today. David McClarty touched on the issue of determined leavers, who are probably from more middle-class, Protestant backgrounds. They choose to go to places such as Scotland and the north of England because they think that they will receive a better education. The reluctant leavers go to universities elsewhere because of the grades and standards that are sought here.

If we look at more of Professor Osborne's research, we see that in maintained schools — this is not Sinn Féin's argument — there seems to be much more provision for, and focus on, kids going into further education. There is better post-16 provision than there is in the controlled sector. It is not the fault of the universities that the majority of students in both universities are Catholic; there are much deeper problems with which we have to deal. I recognise that Protestant underachievement in the Belfast area, for example, is far worse than it is in somewhere such as Glasgow. There are also other factors. A lot of Protestant kids would have looked to the traditional manufacturing firms, such as the shipyard and Mackie's, for employment. There is a changing economic situation.

The last time that this motion was due to be put to the House, Sinn Féin tried to table an amendment that called on the Minister to bring forward proposals to encourage students from all backgrounds to take up further or higher education in both of our universities. However, the amendment was rejected.

I am uncomfortable about the unfair language used by the DUP about both our universities. I understand that in the past there were issues around the Irish language and republicanism. However, that is unfair today. If asked, the students' union would confirm that people of any background — Protestant, unionist and republican included — can set up any society that they want. Both the University of Ulster and Queen's deliver activities and courses in a neutral environment.

The most recent evidence quoted by the Minister is that we are losing students from both Protestant and Catholic backgrounds. It is not a question of from one or the other. Some issues must be separated to assess

whether our further and higher education sectors are becoming sectarianised. We must look at how to deal with the underachievement of Protestants, particularly in the controlled sector in Belfast. The motion is presented in a way that tries to claim that somehow there is discrimination in further and higher education against Protestant students. I totally reject that.

Politically, we must try to ensure that the Assembly works, and that we can share power. That sends a message to people that there is a future here.

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

Mr Butler: I believe that many students in the Protestant community are registering a vote of no confidence in the political dispensation. We have to reject the motion.

Mr Irwin: I thank my colleagues for bringing this important issue to the Floor of the Assembly.

The 'Educational Migration and Non-Return in Northern Ireland' report states clearly that students from a Protestant community background are more likely than those from a Catholic background to pursue higher education in mainland Britain. It also concluded that:

"Around two-thirds of Northern Ireland students who studied in Great Britain do not return to Northern Ireland in the short-to-medium term."

Those two conclusions present their own problems for our learning and employment sectors. I believe that, as the motion states, measures should be brought forward to try to reverse that trend, and, in so doing, to increase our graduate base and stem the brain drain about which we have recently heard so much.

The wide-reaching effects on Northern Ireland of non-return and educational migration have already been stated. Many speeches have been made in the Chamber on the brain drain. Our bright young graduates are not choosing to return to Northern Ireland. The fact that one section of the community seems to be most affected by student migration and non-return should strengthen our resolve to try to address the 11% difference between Catholics and Protestants, as publicised by the Equality Commission.

In looking at some of the reasons for the situation, the research paper lists possibilities such as personal choice, aspirations, widening access to places and competition for places in local universities. Although we cannot and will not demand that students remain in Northern Ireland to study, the Minister can look at reasons for educational migration and non-return, and make some improvements to our higher education system to encourage students to study, and then seek work, in Northern Ireland.

There is stiff competition for further and higher education places here. The report mentions that the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has made available some 600 additional places in the further education sector, which, at the time of the report's publication, had not been filled. I am keen to know how that situation stands a year on.

The common perception may be that affluence plays a large part in a student's decision to study outside Northern Ireland. Although the report lists affluence as a cause, it is not the sole driving factor behind a student's decision. The courses and degrees that students choose to pursue shape their lives, but the report makes clear that where they study also has an influence on where they gain employment. We must look carefully at the reasons for educational migration. The Department must do more to improve the situation for our students, with the emphasis on those from a Protestant background, to ensure that Northern Ireland has the graduates to sustain its economy in the longer term. I support the motion.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I am concerned by the motion's overtones.

First, I believe that it strikes at the very heart of what we call democracy. I have said before and I make no apology for stating again that it would be wrong for the Assembly to interfere with the human rights of young people who apply to universities or higher education institutions throughout the United Kingdom, especially since we are part of the United Kingdom. One's right to freedom of movement and to choose where one completes one's education are part and parcel of the union.

2.00 pm

It would be an intolerable and unsupportable situation if we sought to influence students from a Protestant background to opt merely for the two local universities, rather than universities in other parts of the United Kingdom. We must remember that the United Kingdom is our country, and such measures would restrict and inhibit Protestant students' freedom of action and choice. At the very least, that is the presumption and thinking behind the motion. If not, the motion is meaningless. What is it: empty words or an attempt to restrict the lives and career choices of Protestant students? Any attempt to restrict the freedom of choice of students and school leavers is simply not supportable.

The other factor that turns me against the motion is that, in my experience of education — first in the Republic of Ireland, then in a university in Northern Ireland and then across the water doing research and studying law — not once at any of the institutions in which I studied did sectarianism ever raise its head. I object to anything that attacks the very heart of

education by bringing sectarianism into it. Education is for the benefit of individuals, not for any particular denomination or section of society.

Economic factors play a big part for young teachers who have gone through university and are applying for a job in our schools. Given that there are nine applications for every vacancy, is it any wonder that students who want to go into education look at the overall situation and decide that the best way to get a job is to go to a university near to where jobs are available? Economic factors apply no matter where young people are educated. Nevertheless, even when young people go across the water to study at universities in other parts of the United Kingdom, it is great that they are as well educated there as they would have been if they had gone to a university in Northern Ireland. For those reasons, I cannot support the motion.

Mr O'Loan: I welcome the debate, because it provides me with an opportunity to counter some of the myths surrounding this issue. The motion is based to some degree on fact, but the wording of and thoughts behind the motion and the remedies that have been suggested are not well founded. To the extent that the motion has some validity, it is not clear whether the Department for Employment and Learning bears sole responsibility. The issue is broadly situated in several policy areas.

It is a reality that the proportion of Protestant students entering higher education who migrate to Great Britain is significantly higher than that for Catholics: 34% compared to 23%.

Mr Dallat: Does the Member agree that, rather than generating something positive, today's motion will send out a very negative message to young prospective Protestant students considering going to university in Northern Ireland? Rather than achieving something positive and useful, the motion will do the very opposite. It is also highly offensive to our two universities, which, year after year, are on record as addressing problems of equality, including sectarianism.

Mr O'Loan: I agree. Indeed, I was going to make a similar point. I think that the Minister, when he commented on the motion which was not debated in October, did not present the full picture. He emphasised the actual numbers, which are roughly equal, of Catholics and Protestants going to Great Britain, but I think that the proportions are more important. The proportion of "what" is also very important. I quoted the percentages of people entering higher education, but equally important is the proportion of the age group that is eligible to enter higher education. I believe that that presents a very different picture, and I will return to that.

The Equality Commission, as has been noted, tells us that around two thirds of students who study in Great

Britain do not return in the short to medium term, but even that simple statement needs to be qualified. Not enough is really known about the long-term patterns, and it depends very much on the economic climate pertaining at the time. In fact, one author writing in the CRC research journal said that, on the basis of stated intentions at aged 16, overall Protestants are more likely to come back if they leave, and there is very little evidence of the actual returnee figures.

We need to take seriously the research evidence from the Equality Commission on the actual factors influencing student migration to Great Britain. Those include personal choice and aspirations; socio-economic status and affluence; student funding; and the availability of places. There is little or no evidence that chill factors have an impact on the composition of Queen's University and the University of Ulster. It is important to state and recognise that fact.

It is also important not to perpetuate myths around the issue. That is potentially damaging to the universities, as John Dallat said, and it might contribute to the problem that the proposers fear. If credit were given to them, they would be in danger of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, I hope that that credit will not be given to them.

Let us analyse what is going on: there is a shortage of higher education places in Northern Ireland; the number of places is capped by the Executive; and 29% of our higher education students leave, and very few come back. That is a major issue for us. Those who leave Northern Ireland must be split into two groups: those who want to leave and those who have no choice but to move. Incidentally, as some Members have pointed out, we should welcome the opportunity offered for experience outside Northern Ireland. On the whole, that is very healthy. Because of the scarcity of places, the grades required are higher than for equivalent courses in many GB universities.

Everything that I quote here is from established research. DEL research from 2008 states that Protestants are not getting as good A-level results as Catholics. There is no difference in the grammar schools, but there is a big difference in the secondary schools. The Equality Commission's figures confirm that Catholics are more likely to have the required entry grades: 47% of Catholic school leavers in 2005-06 had two or more A levels compared to 42% of Protestant school leavers.

There is competition for university places, and, as a result, many young Protestants may have to look across the water to get a place. Also, there is evidence that, although young Catholics have their eyes set on university, many young Protestants only look to further education. Therefore, it is important to identify the problem. Does anything need to be done, or can anything be done?

Far more Catholics than Protestants are going into higher education in any case: 40% against 34% in 2005-06. That is a remarkably stark and serious statistic. Therefore, the real task is to bring up the educational standards in Protestant secondary schools and to change the culture in Protestant working-class areas, so that there is a much greater aspiration to higher levels of education.

We know that our future here is in a knowledge-based economy, and we need to prepare for that. The party from which the proposer comes might need to think what can be done to address the real problem as I have presented it. That might make him and his party consider their education policies, particularly around the area of academic selection.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I oppose the motion. However, I listened to Mr Easton and Mr Craig, and I took Mr Easton at his word when he said that they did not table the motion as a means to get at anyone. He articulated his party's stance, which is well intentioned, and that is welcome. If any group faces barriers to accessing higher education, I fully support the raising of that issue in the Chamber and elsewhere. The debate is about widening access to higher education.

If, in the past, there were situations and contexts, either real or perceived, that barred young people or made them feel as though they were not welcome in higher education institutions, that was, clearly, unacceptable. However, evidence shows that society has moved on from that situation, if it existed. If there is migration to Britain by young people who want to study at universities there, research by Osborne, Smith and Gallagher supports the view that they go for complex and nuanced reasons, as my colleague Paul Butler mentioned. One such reason is cost. Certainly, it is difficult for young people from socially deprived backgrounds to go elsewhere to study. Other Members have raised that point. Perhaps, work needs to be done on another front to widen access and remove barriers to higher education.

As regards the chill factor, I refer again to the research that was carried out by Professor Osborne and others. As part of that research, a cohort of year-12 pupils were asked whether they were aware of any determining factors that would bar them from or make them not want to go to a particular university. Sixty-three per cent said that they were not aware of any factors that would bar them from or make them feel unwelcome at a particular university. The range of factors included ethnicity, disability and religion. Of the cohort, 4% said that there were determining factors. Of that 4%, I believe that 15 pupils said that they would consider religion to be a factor. That is a very small minority. Those figures came from asking young people.

Some Members mentioned the Equality Commission's research, which points out that, although Protestants are more likely to go to higher education institutions in Britain, that is possibly a matter of choice for some young people who do not consider that they will need a grant to study. Many of them considered that they would simply ask their parents to help them out. However, a young person from a socially deprived background cannot do that. Those issues must be examined.

I want to go back to the chill factor.

2.15 pm

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

Mrs McGill: I will finish on this point, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Equality Commission has stated that there is little recent evidence of political chill factors on this matter.

Mr Shannon: I look at this matter from a slightly different angle to that of the Member who has just spoken. The motion was tabled after recent figures showed that three quarters of Ulster students who choose further education institutions on the mainland are Protestants. That is the issue that is before the House. We are asking why that is the case. On 25 May 2006, the 'News Letter' stated that that phenomenon was due to the Province's higher fees and student loans. The newspaper stated that a study that it carried out found that fewer Protestants were applying for any higher education, and it found that one of the compelling reasons for that was that students were concerned about getting into debt. Many Members are aware of that. The fear of debt is deterring some students at secondary schools from going to university.

Any time that I speak on an issue in the Chamber, I speak from experiences that I have become aware of in my constituency office; it comes from the people whom I represent. That is where I am coming from in addressing this motion. Many boys from Protestant or controlled schools cannot see an advantage in investing in education, if it means getting into debt. Instead, they plump for a trade, especially in the construction industry, where there is a potential to earn big money relatively early in their career. Of course, the big money in the construction industry is long gone. We hope that it will return, but that will be some time in the future. Those same fears about debt were expressed by Roman Catholic male pupils but at significantly lower levels.

This haes men't that less warkin cless bakgroon Protestan mael's hae pit in fer univarsitie wi' mony bein a majer kinsarn, en this wus a real feer whun univarsitie fees pit alang sied wi' an ennin o' grants an tha stert o' studen loans. Shairly this is sumthin which tha Meinstar must tak a closer luk at. Ther is wae in

whuch maer woarkin cless studens wull stae oan in further leer an that is by gien mare help en suppoart.

That has meant that fewer working-class Protestant males apply for university, with money a major factor. That is a real fear when one considers the level of university fees, coupled with the end of grants and the beginning of student loans. Surely the Minister must closely review that situation. More working-class students will stay on in further education if they are given more help and practical support. The criteria for help and aid must be looked at again to encourage more people to consider staying at home to go to university.

The Minister and his Department must take that into account if we are to induce the working class to go into third-level education. The idea of going to university is too daunting for young people from many struggling families. Those young people feel that to bring in money in the short term is better than a long-term investment in their future. That is the issue for many people. They weigh up the options of making money in the short term or making a long-term commitment to university.

We are left with the middle classes believing that they can get a taste of the so-called high life on the mainland at very little extra cost. They might as well go there than apply to universities in Northern Ireland, stay here, live at home and continue to struggle as much as they would on the mainland. The phrase “the grass is always greener” certainly applies to many young people who make such decisions.

The majority of students who study on the mainland do not come home. Therefore, they do not bring home their expertise, which would better Northern Ireland. We benefit from their work in the form of taxes that are paid to the UK Treasury and, subsequently, in the distribution to Northern Ireland of the block grant, but we would benefit more if we kept our bright minds in Northern Ireland to offer all that they had to move Northern Ireland forward. I have a simple question for the Minister: how best can we achieve that? That is where we are coming from in approaching this motion. Some Members who have spoken have grasped what we are trying to achieve.

The majority of school leavers from the Catholic community prefer to continue their education at home. Subsequently, they get jobs at home, and their expertise remains in the Province. That is great. They make a valuable contribution; that is what I am saying, and that is what my party is saying.

What can be done to ensure that the best of all sectors of the community contribute directly to the Province? That is the issue. I am not asking for restriction on freedom of movement, not by any stretch of the imagination. I am asking the Minister what can

be done to encourage those who have, for the most part owing to financial constraints, decided that they may as well go to the mainland rather than stay at home. We are looking for a plan of action and a method to address the problems.

The Minister has always been responsive to any issues that I have raised, and I know that he has acted similarly in respect of other Members who have asked questions. I ask the Minister to ensure that the matter is not left to worsen as the years go by and that we encourage our students to get the best education possible.

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

Mr Shannon: I support all the young people in the Province, especially those asking for help and change.

Mr G Robinson: I support the motion. I congratulate my colleagues on securing this debate, which highlights the great loss of potential and talent that Northern Ireland has experienced over the years. We must try to ensure that students who are considering going to universities outside Northern Ireland are encouraged as much as possible to attend the high-quality universities in Northern Ireland. It is disturbing to note that three quarters — 74% — of the students who expressed a wish to study at universities in other parts of the United Kingdom were deemed to be from a Protestant/unionist background.

All Members are aware that pupils in Northern Ireland outperform every other area of the UK at GCSE, AS and A level, due to the best education system in Europe and despite some people's determination to wreck that system. How can we sit back and watch that talent and potential walk away from Northern Ireland? We can no longer allow that situation to continue; otherwise we will end up with universities that will be perceived to be Catholic-only institutions. From experiences in my constituency office, I am aware that some young Protestants have that perception already.

As far as possible, we need our young people to stay in Northern Ireland. We need their skills in IT, business and bioscience research. The economic downturn will, eventually, turn into an economic upturn. If our young people do not gain those skills at our universities, we will not have the skills base in place to attract the employers who wish to set up business in Northern Ireland, and we risk having a skills base that is not truly or fairly representative of the Northern Ireland population.

Many people in my East Londonderry constituency have attended the University of Ulster at the Coleraine campus and the campuses at Magee and Belfast, and Queen's University — all excellent universities — to attain skills that can be used for the betterment of individuals in Northern Ireland. I welcome that, but I

want to see the Protestant exodus of students addressed proactively to ensure that we have equality of opportunity for all in Northern Ireland.

I urge the Minister to look at the situation urgently. I believe that Northern Ireland has a positive and bright future, but that future must be based on the inclusion of all in our society. Perhaps the Minister could look at the courses that students have left their homeland to study and encourage our native universities to offer those courses. That could encourage part of the exodus to stay at home. Can the Minister also examine the financial help that could be given to students, especially those from socio-economic backgrounds where finance is of particular concern? The issue will not go away and, if young Protestants feel that local universities are becoming Catholic-only institutions, it will continue to grow.

Mr Dallat: On this day of political uncertainty, it is a matter of regret that this motion is before the Assembly. It is not building on the cornerstone of the Good Friday Agreement, which is the promotion of partnership between the two sections of our community. My initial temptation was to ignore the motion.

If Mr Campbell wishes me to give way, I am more than happy to do so.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. According to Mr Dallat's premise, rights, demands and equality are OK when nationalists are making the demands, but he seems to have a problem when unionists have a problem that needs to be addressed. He cannot simply look at the merits of the case.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Dallat: I understand Mr Campbell's enthusiasm for asking questions. However, if he had waited until I had finished my speech, I would have dealt with his issue.

Rather than ignore the matter, I pay tribute to the two universities and the other colleges of further education for their outstanding efforts to promote equality in all its forms. I served on the Committee for Employment and Learning for some time, and I know just how seriously the universities take the issue of equality. I also know that they have courageously attempted to address the underrepresentation of the Protestant community in the past. The universities have acted decisively on that issue, as they have on others.

I have personal knowledge of the issue: my son Diarmuid attends the Magee campus of the University of Ulster. Most of his friends there are from the Protestant community, and they have never expressed any concerns, which makes me conclude that he and they are enriched by studying and working together in a mixed environment. My daughter Helena was not so lucky and had to go Aberystwyth University in Wales

to study. As the father of an only daughter, I can tell the House that the anguish of losing her was much greater than the financial problems. However, for her, time abroad was good in other ways.

Mr Kennedy: Wales? Abroad?

Mr Dallat: I know that Danny Kennedy has been somewhat confused in recent times. His geography is not up to what I thought it was, and he has been wandering all over the place. However, perhaps I will present him with an atlas when I have finished speaking.

Rather than doing anything to assist the young people in the Protestant community who are sitting their A levels this year and who are making the most important decision of their life, the motion will perhaps put some of them off going to our local universities. I listened to Mr George Robinson in particular, and God grant that he has no influence. Young people from the Protestant community in the past unfortunately listened to politicians and took their advice, which of course was all wrong. Thankfully, the new generation does not listen as much, does not accept that it is defeated or persecuted and is working closely together with young people from different communities. That is happening in Coleraine, for example, where the university is responsible not just for academic education but for research, in the medium and long term, which will hopefully generate hundreds if not thousands of jobs.

As other contributors to the debate have said, the real issues are why there is a cap on university numbers here; why many more young people from the Protestant, Catholic and other communities do not have the opportunity to stay at home to study; and why, due to our economic problems, many are not going to university at all. We have a background here of talking a lot about education, but we also ignore the absolute need to improve our standards across the entire spectrum. Rather than dwelling on that issue, we should speak positively and encourage more of our young people to take up the challenge of going to university so that future generations will have job security and will not be forced to emigrate to Wales or anywhere else.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Dawn Purvis. I think you have about a minute in which to speak.

Ms Purvis: I appreciate your letting me in, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The real question in the debate is not whether our young people are leaving Northern Ireland to study elsewhere but whether those young people — whatever their background — look to Northern Ireland as a place worth coming back to following that experience. Sadly, for many the answer is no, and there is a tragedy in that.

Northern Ireland is a relatively small place, and we will not be able to cater for the ambitions and aspirations of all the young people who are born here; we understand that. However, what disturbed me most in reviewing the research on the issue were the suggestions that young people from integrated education and those who are gay, lesbian and bisexual are the most determined not to return to Northern Ireland if they leave. That is a clear indictment of our society as one that does not offer a future for all.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

As other contributors to the debate have said, the figures indicate only a marginal difference between the number of Protestants and Catholics leaving to study elsewhere. Whatever the figures are, it is good news that a healthy proportion of our young people have the chance to study away from home, experience new things and be exposed to different societies, cultures and ideas. We will benefit from their experience but only if we can offer them a place to return to that is inclusive and embraces the broad spectrum of ideas and innovations.

Instead of focusing on ways to chain young people, Protestant or otherwise, to the Province, the authors of the motion would have done better to focus their efforts and the motion on creating the type of society that our young people would choose to live in and choose to come back to after living, studying or travelling elsewhere. Instead, they focus on propping up a system of compulsory education that discriminates disproportionately against working class Protestant boys. I do not support the motion.

Mr Speaker: The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Minister Empey.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Transfer 2010

1. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Education for an update on transfer 2010. (AQO 619/10)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Cuireadh tús le haistriú 2010 cheana féin, leis an mbéim atá anois á cur ar chomhionannas rochtana chuig an iarbhunskoil. Cuireadh cuid mhór eolais ar fáil do thuismitheoirí agus do scoileanna lena chinntiú go mbeidh páistí ábalta aistriú chuig an iarbhunskoil ar bhealach ordúil faoi na socruithe do aistriú 2010 atá anois i bhfeidhm.

Transfer 2010, with its emphasis on equality for all children in post-primary education, is now well under way. A significant volume of information has been provided to parents and schools to help ensure that children are able to transfer in an orderly fashion, with equality at its core, under the transfer 2010 arrangements that have been put in place.

My Department published two advice leaflets for parents of P7 children in September and December 2009, and it also issued detailed operational guidance to schools in September 2009 initially, with an updated version issued in December 2009. That was supplemented with separate and detailed advice on the issues of setting workable admissions criteria that abide by the law and the obligations of primary school principals facing demands for information to assist breakaway schools with the application of academic admissions criteria. That will be kept under review, and further advice will be issued as necessary.

Earlier this month, education and library boards published transfer booklets containing details of all schools' admissions criteria. Those booklets, along with school open nights, which are currently happening, will inform the process of parents completing a transfer form at a meeting with the primary school principal in February. Boards, or the education and skills authority, if it is established in time, will process transfer forms to reflect parental preference and the availability of places over the ensuing weeks, with equality at the core — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: That will lead to the issuing of placement letters at the end of May 2010.

Parents who are unhappy with school placement decisions may submit an appeal to an independent appeals tribunal.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Kennedy for a supplementary question, I remind Members that it is important that they continually rise in their place if they wish to ask a supplementary question — “continually” is the important word.

Mr Kennedy: In light of the clear fact that the vast majority of schools are ignoring the Minister’s transfer 2010 policy, does she not now, even at this late stage, accept that her vision has failed? Will she join with other parties in entering talks on the issue of post-primary transfer without preconditions and with her mind open to the wishes of not only the House, but the vast majority of parents?

The Minister of Education: Unlike Members on the opposite Benches, who claim to represent the unionist community, I do not hide my head in the sand. I do not ignore the numbers of young people leaving our schools with inadequate literacy and numeracy. Neither I nor my party has ignored the number of young people who have been failed by our education system. The past distortion of the primary school curriculum has been a major factor in leading to the numbers of young people who are leaving the system without the levels of literacy and numeracy that we would like them to have.

The Members opposite can continue to ignore that and pretend that there is no impact, or they can join with the rest of us in understanding the impact of the selective system in the past on our primary curriculum and on our young people as they move on.

We have had the talks and the discussions. I think that there are questions that the SDLP must answer to its constituency. Is that party departing from a 40-year policy of saying that it is opposed to academic selection and inequality?

My party is totally and utterly opposed to academic selection and to inequality in the education system, and we will not continue with a system that discriminates against children, whether they are from the Catholic community, the Protestant community or any ethnic minority community. We are putting equality — comhionannas — as the cornerstone of the education system, and we are proud that we are doing that.

Mr O’Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister have any plans or proposals to introduce a regulated transfer system for current P6 pupils?

The Minister of Education: B’fhearr liom córas rialaithe aistrithe a bheith i bhfeidhm, agus tá mé réidh le hoibriú chun sin a bhaint amach.

I would prefer that a regulated system of transfer were put in place, and I am ready to work towards that. We cannot move forward on the issue until there is a common understanding that testing children at age 10 or 11 is unnecessary and detrimental to their educational development. Children should be entitled to education; it is theirs by right, not because they failed or passed a test.

Mr Storey: The Minister says repeatedly that equality is at the heart of all she does, so will she explain how, as shown by the publication of the education and library boards’ prospectuses for schools, hardly any schools have taken her advice on equality in regard to free school meals? One of the schools that have ignored the Minister happens to be that of a senior bishop of a religious order in Northern Ireland of which I am not a member. Why has the controlled sector been ignored yet again, and why have councillors not been appointed to the transitional arrangements leading to the reconstitution of the education and library boards? Can the Minister explain that, and, for the first time, give the House an answer?

The Minister of Education: Thankfully, the vast majority of schools in the system have operated fair admissions criteria. Only a small number of schools have departed and operated breakaway admissions criteria. I am glad that the Member has noted what the Catholic Church is doing, and I hope that he will join me in commending the Catholic Church at the highest level, as expressed by Cardinal Brady, on telling all schools in the Catholic sector that they should abide by transfer 2010 and that they should not operate breakaway tests.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. How many schools have adopted the transfer 2010 guidelines? Will the Minister agree that the schools that will use the guidelines are already doing so in any case and that the majority of schools have ignored them, rendering them ineffectual? Will she further agree with me and with her colleague Jennifer McCann that the problem of transfer continues because nothing has been put in its place?

The Minister of Education: I certainly agree with Jennifer McCann that equality needs to be the cornerstone of the education system. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: I listened carefully to what Jennifer McCann said, and I pay tribute to her for her stance in opposition to academic selection and for her support for equality to be at the core of the education system. Jennifer, like me and every Member on the Sinn Féin Benches, understands the importance of not failing children. I urge Members on the other Benches, who have their heads in the sand, to get a

transcript of Jennifer's interviews and listen to and take advice from her. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: Jennifer and I agree on the matter. As the Member said, the vast majority of schools have been operating a fair system in relation to free school meals. Members will know that the secondary sector has a higher proportion of children who receive free school meals. That is not fair, and it will not continue, because we need more equality in the system.

Special Educational Needs and Inclusion Review

2. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Education why the consultation period for the review of special educational needs and inclusion has been extended.

(AQO 620/10)

The Minister of Education: Eisíodh an cháipéis chomhairliúcháin 'Gach Scoil ina Scoil Mhaith — an Bealach chun Tosaigh do Riachtanais Speisialta Oideachais agus Chuimsiú' le haghaidh comhairliúcháin ar an 10 Lúnasa 2009, agus ba é an 31 Deireadh Fómhair 2009 an chéad dáta deiridh do fhreagraí.

The consultation document 'Every School a Good School: The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion' was issued for consultation on 10 August 2009 with an initial closing date for responses of 31 October 2009. As there had been a delay of more than one year while the Executive considered the draft consultation document, and following their approval in July 2009, I agreed to issue the document for consultation as soon as possible to avoid further delay and to enable the public, schools and other stakeholders to begin to consider the proposals. After a number of requests from parents, schools, MLAs and others, I agreed to extend the closing date to 30 November 2009. Then, in early December, after further consideration, I decided to further extend the consultation period to 31 January 2010. My decision is based upon my firm belief that provision for children with special educational needs is of vital importance, especially to parents and schools. I want to ensure that everyone who wishes to respond to the proposals in the document has the time to do so.

It is imperative that provision for children with special educational needs builds upon the good practice that is already evidenced in many schools and that it is substantially improved upon so that no child has to experience a delay before the appropriate intervention is put in place.

The review proposals aim to build the capacity of schools to meet more effectively the needs of pupils

with special educational needs through earlier identification of need, effective use of school-based interventions and through the advice and support that is available to them from a range of professionals, when necessary.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her answer. How much of the funding for special educational needs will be spent on groups that have additional educational needs, such as Traveller or newcomer children? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathail. Ní aitreofar aon chistiú ó riachtanais speisialta oideachais chuig grúpaí eile a aithníodh faoi choincheapanna riachtanais bhreise oideachais.

No funding will be diverted from special educational needs to the other groups that have been identified within the additional educational needs concept. Each of the groups that have been identified has its own specific policy and attracts its own funding streams. That will continue to be the case.

In 2007-08, around £185 million was spent on special educational needs. In 2008-09, £202 million was spent on special educational needs; £6.5 million was spent on supporting newcomer children; £1.1 million was spent on our Traveller children; £569,000 was spent on school-aged mothers; £345,000 was spent on looked-after children; £7.65 million was spent on promoting positive behaviour; and £1.99 million was spent on the emotional health and well-being of pupils.

Mrs M Bradley: Does the Minister agree that any changes in special educational needs procedure should not threaten the statutory rights of the children who have special needs or those of their parents?

The Minister of Education: I absolutely agree that it is important that the money that goes to our children with special educational needs is ring-fenced. I know that some people have stated that that is not the case; therefore, I will clarify it.

Meastar go mbeidh leithdháiltí a thugtar do scoileanna mar gheall ar riachtanais speisialta oideachais so-aitheanta agus inmhonatóiríú.

It is envisaged that allocations that are made to schools under any special educational needs factor that might be developed under the local management of schools formula will be easily identifiable to schools, and, therefore, will be able to be monitored.

During the talks that led to the St Andrews Agreement, and, indeed, in any discussions that we have had, my party always prioritised rights and equality. Those rights and the equality of children will continue to be prioritised.

2.45 pm

Mr McCallister: Does the Minister acknowledge the findings of the Lamb inquiry, which showed that parents value a statement of special educational needs because it is legally enforceable and that they want a new system to work better than the present one? Will she assure the House that she will take into consideration the findings of the Lamb inquiry? Does she think that parents have a lack of trust in her to deliver a suitable policy?

The Minister of Education: Is í is aidhm do na tograí ná soláthar do pháistí agus do dhaoine óga a bhfuil riachtanais speisialta oideachais acu a fheabhsú taobh istigh den scoil.

The proposals aim to enhance the provision for children and young people with special educational needs within their school setting, by ensuring that they get the right support at the right time, without the need to wait for long periods for external assessment or support when it can be provided from within the school's resources. The proposals do not and will not reduce the rights of parents as currently available to them through the appeals mechanism of the special educational needs and disability tribunal. Depending on the detailed outworking of the proposals, parental rights may be differently reflected, but that detail is yet to be developed and can only be considered following consideration of the responses to the consultation.

I have been to many special schools and have met with the parents of many children with special educational needs. Our Department consulted with a very wide range of parents and educationalists, and we have produced for consideration a very thorough policy. We welcome anyone and everyone making a contribution to it, and we will read the responses very carefully.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

STEM Subjects

4. **Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of Education why funds for developing science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects have been returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel. (AQO 622/10)

The Minister of Education: Chuir mo Roinn cistiú faoi urrús ón geiste nuálaíochta le tacaíocht a thabhairt d'ábhair STEM agus d'fhás sainscoileanna STEM; tá mé sásta go bhfuil seacht scoil déag a bhfuil sainainmníochtaí STEM acu. Táimid ag déanamh réimse an-leathan nuálaíochtaí eile chun STEM a chur chun cinn.

My Department secured funding from the Innovation Fund Ireland to support STEM subjects and

the growth of STEM specialist schools. I am pleased that we now have 17 schools with STEM specialist designation. We are undertaking a wide range of other interventions to promote science, technology, engineering and maths. A programme of professional development for teachers has been commissioned to promote and support STEM in the primary and post-primary sectors within the revised curriculum, as well as improving the range and quality of resources available to teachers and pupils. We are also supporting the Institute of Physics in Ireland and the establishment of a physics teacher network here. STEM-focused career education, information, advice and guidance are other crucial elements of our efforts to promote STEM subjects and pathways.

Clearly, our work to raise standards in literacy and numeracy also contributes to ensuring that young people have the opportunity to develop the communication and mathematical skills they need to access STEM subjects and STEM careers.

My Department funds a number of exciting, major events designed to encourage our young people to consider careers in STEM. Last week, I told the Assembly about the BT Young Scientist and Technology competition. This year, entries to that from the North had increased by 66%. I was delighted once again to host a reception in the Long Gallery for all the students from the North who entered the competition and to attend the award ceremony in Dublin at which two out of four of the top awards in this island were made to schools in the North. My Department also funds the STEM Experience, which is planned to run for three years and aims to promote a better understanding of STEM. A total of 1,822 primary school pupils from P6 and P7, and 1,842 secondary pupils in years 8 to 10, attended the events. We also fund the very successful £1.2 million STEM truck, which is a resource that benefits the entire island of Ireland and a wide range of schools.

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: It is a mobile teaching laboratory. What is happening is very exciting, but I am not complacent, and there is lots more work to be done. We have to find the spark — the chispa — that ignites the fire of learning in our young people.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Will the Minister tell the House whether the entire budget for STEM subjects has been used, and how much has been returned?

The Minister of Education: My Department secured funding from the innovation fund to support the growth of STEM specialist schools. That funding included a £3 million resource allocation that is fully committed and a capital element that can be used only to support capital projects that are related to STEM specialist schools. As the innovation fund is a central

ring-fenced fund, it cannot be used to support other areas of capital development, and, if it is unused, it must be returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP).

Funding for the innovation fund was confirmed in January 2008 when the Executive published the 2008-2011 Budget, by which time important lessons had been learned from the experience of previous capital support grants to specialist schools. After a review of the policy, and based on the experience of schools in previous years, the funding arrangements were changed, and the capital support grant was removed and replaced by a current support grant. The same level of capital funding was not, therefore, needed, and the additional recurrent funding was made available through the existing Budget. The costs associated with the construction of the STEM truck fell — I am sure that Members are glad to hear that — thereby leaving a surplus in the 2009-2010 Budget of £816,000. In line with current budgeting rules, there is no flexibility to transfer capital budget to recurrent budgets, and there is a clear responsibility to secure value for money from all public expenditure.

The Department of Education declared other easements in respect of funding from the innovation fund. Those were: £0.6 million, which was caused by difficulties in recruiting staff, increasing the programme of professional development in STEM areas and the lower than expected bids received from STEM specialist schools; and £51,000, £40,000 of which was caused by delays in recruiting staff to identify gaps in STEM curricular resources and developing and disseminating such resources to promote STEM in the primary and post-primary sectors, and £11,000 of which was caused by the lower than expected cost of the independent panel's assessing the STEM applications from schools.

Mr P Ramsey: I acknowledge the Minister's comments about the importance of access to, and growth of, STEM subjects. Will the Minister outline her Department's implementation plan for the STEM review?

The Minister of Education: As Members know, the STEM report is a comprehensive document that was jointly launched by Reg Empey and me. The launch was exciting and innovative, and it took place on the same day that we launched the STEM truck, which I was proud to be part of showcasing at the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition in Dublin. The truck was at the exhibition all week, and students from all over the island had the opportunity to see it. I am happy to forward a copy of the STEM report and the Department's implementation plan to the Member, if he does not already have them.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Lord Browne, I remind Members that it is important that they continually rise in their place if they wish to ask a supplementary question. There is no point in Members' rising once and then thinking that they will be called to ask a supplementary question, because that will not happen. I make that absolutely clear. I do not know how many times the Deputy Speakers and I have had to say that in recent weeks.

Lord Browne: Will the Minister tell us the rationale for reducing the capital funding of STEM from £75,000 to £25,000?

The Minister of Education: I already explained in a detailed answer that the capital funding is ring-fenced, and the rules for that. *[Interruption.]* I am not going to take the time to repeat that.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Most Members will, objectively, recognise the value of STEM subjects in rebuilding and sustaining a viable economy here. Will the Minister give us an indication of the events that her Department funds in promoting STEM subjects?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin, agus aontaim leat faoi STEM. Promotion of STEM subjects is important for future economic growth, and my Department is fully committed to playing its role. I also wish to mention the revised curriculum, because it focuses on ensuring that all pupils have the opportunity to develop knowledge and skills in communications, mathematics, ICT and science, and the skills needed to succeed in life and work.

Some of the best experiences that I have witnessed involved young people in primary schools learning science through play. I watched one class, in which the children had built a volcano and learned about volcanoes through an interactive whiteboard. Those children did not realise that they were learning. However, they were learning, and in a real and very stimulating way. That is much better than the 11-plus, in which children learned about the life cycle of the frog and, in many ways, were bored to death. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: For the past two years, and for the first time ever, we have been funding the BT Young Scientist and Technology exhibition in Dublin, which is an absolutely fantastic event. I have been working very closely with BT and with schools in the North; and, every year, there is an incredible increase in participation in that event.

Earlier, I mentioned the Institute of Physics in Ireland, and the Department has a special programme

with primary school principals. On the North/South agenda, there was a conference in Cavan on the teaching of mathematics in primary schools, which brought together teachers from across the island to share good practice.

The Department is funding a specialist schools programme, and there are 17 schools with specialist designations in science, technology and mathematics. Reg Empey and I, and our Departments, are working very closely to ensure the promotion of science, technology, engineering and maths.

Educational Disadvantage

5. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of whether there is educational disadvantage among Protestant boys compared to the rest of the population. (AQO 623/10)

The Minister of Education: Bíonn míbhuntáiste oideachasúil ann i measc buachaillí agus cailíní Protastúnacha agus Caitliceacha araon. Is minic a bhíonn baint aige seo le míbhuntáiste socheacnamaíoch agus go mbíonn sé níos measa mar gheall ar an easpa dóchais.

Educational disadvantage exists among Protestants and Catholics, among boys and girls, and among our ethnic minorities. Too often, it is related to socio-economic disadvantage and is compounded by poverty of aspiration.

Educational underachievement can be defined as those children who leave school without having achieved at least five good GCSEs at grades A* to C, including maths and English or Irish. In 2007 to 2008, the number of Catholic boys not achieving at that level was greater than the number of Protestant boys, with almost 2,900 Catholic boys compared to just over 2,600 Protestant boys. Although that represents a greater number of Catholic boys, a greater percentage of Protestant boys did not achieve at least five good GCSEs, with 52% of Protestant boys versus 48% of Catholic boys not achieving at that level.

For girls, the picture is very similar, with 38% of Protestant girls not achieving at that level, compared to 36.5% of Catholic girls. However, at 2,200, the number of Catholic girls who do not achieve at least five good GCSEs, including maths and English or Irish, is greater than the number of Protestant girls, at almost 1,900.

I hope that my answer shows the importance of us not sectarianising the debate. We need to deal with underachievement wherever and whenever it exists. I am fully committed to improving outcomes for all young people whether they are Catholic or Protestant, boys or girls, or from our newcomer communities, the

children from which have so many hurdles to overcome.

I am putting in place a jigsaw of interconnected policies that put the child at the centre of the education system. For example, the 'Every School a Good School' policy, transfer 2010, the revised curriculum, the literacy and numeracy strategy, the review of special educational needs and inclusion, the Achieving Belfast and Derry programmes, and the establishment of the ESA.

Mr K Robinson: Despite the smokescreen that the Minister has put up, she often regales the House with her claims that she is concerned about children from the Shankill, Rathcoole, the Waterside and other areas. Given the empirical facts in front of her, why, since 2007, has the Minister not addressed that specific issue?

3.00 pm

The Minister of Education: I am looking at the empirical facts. I respectfully suggest that every Member on the Benches opposite studies very carefully the empirical facts. The Members opposite have hidden their heads in the sand. They are afraid, for whatever reason, to deal with some of the deep inequalities that affect children from the Falls, the Shankill and the Waterside.

I have brought forward policies and proposals; I am not afraid to deal with the impact of academic selection on our working-class areas. I have shown Members the statistics for the number of children from the Shankill and New Lodge that get access to grammar schools. I am not the one sectarianising the debate.

I have brought forward policies that are based on dealing with inequality, wherever it exists. Neither I nor my party is afraid to deal with the difficult issues, and we will not stand by and watch as more generations of young people are failed by the system. That is why we have a literacy and numeracy strategy; that is why we have the review of special needs and inclusion; that is why we have our task force on the education of Traveller children; that is why we have our Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry initiatives; and that is why we have transfer 2010.

We are taking on the small number of people who do not want change in the system. Those people think that, if they operate breakaway tests, they will stop us from continuing with our proposals. However, they will not.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Belfast Metropolitan College

1. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why the consultants appointed to review the efficiency of Belfast Metropolitan College were not able to meet with the former director.

(AQO 633/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): When the review was undertaken, the college director was ill. He has subsequently retired on ill-health grounds.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Will the Minister confirm whether the Department of Finance and Personnel will have any involvement in the review that will take place at Belfast Metropolitan College?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The review has been completed, and work is ongoing on its implementation. There is a new chief executive at the college, and she has made it clear that the college and the board are working very closely on the implementation of the recommendations in the review. I am confident now that the new chief executive is in place. The chief executive post was filled for a long period by Dr Raymond Mullan, who was acting up. He did a first-class job under very difficult circumstances. With the new arrangements in place, the college will be able to restore its financial position to the extent that we can be confident that it can go forward into the future.

Mr A Maginness: I note what the Minister said, and I understand the circumstances in which the previous director was not effectively consulted. That was regrettable, but we have a new director for the college, we have a review and we have an opportunity to move forward. Does the Minister agree that that represents a very important opportunity for the college to move forward in this new decade?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I agree with the honourable Member. The new director will address the Committee for Employment and Learning in the middle of next month, and it is my hope that we will have a meeting before that. The financial position for the year before last was unsatisfactory but, in the current year, although there may continue to be a deficit, it will be on a much smaller scale, and the college will have the reserves to meet it. The combination of those events and decisions will result in the college coming back into balance shortly.

The provision of education is the primary objective, and I should say that I am satisfied that it is continuing and that the number of students is continuing to grow. The college is well placed, particularly given that the new estate is being built in the Titanic Quarter. It has a bright future as our largest single further education

college, and I am confident that we have taken the steps that are necessary to ensure its viable future.

Holylands Area

2. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline progress on issues affecting the Holylands area of south Belfast following the Holylands stakeholder forum held in October 2009.

(AQO 634/10)

15. **Mr Cobain** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to promote improved student-community relations surrounding this year's St Patrick's Day holiday, especially in the Holylands area of Belfast.

(AQO 647/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 2 and 15 together.

I confirm that additional community safety wardens were deployed in the university area from 25 October 2009 to provide support during the Halloween period. Moreover, the PSNI dedicated significant resources to the area. Overall feedback has been positive, and it is hoped that the same procedure will have a beneficial impact on St Patrick's Day 2010.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister and his Department for their initiatives with the Holylands stakeholder forum. I am concerned about St Patrick's Day this year and want to know exactly what discussions have taken place, particularly with the PSNI, the universities and other organisations, to put measures in place to ensure that, compared with last year, we have a good St Patrick's Day this year.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I share the honourable Member's hope and expectation that St Patrick's Day 2010 will be an enjoyable occasion for the students and people in the Holylands area. As the Member may know, the inter-agency group has been expanded in the past few months to include Departments, including my own, and other relevant organisations. Moreover, Belfast City Council has established the Holylands inter-agency group, and planning approval is being sought to place CCTV cameras in the Holylands area.

On the question of student and community relations, since March 2009 I have been actively involved in discussions with key stakeholders, including, as the Member will know, elected Members, residents' groups, landlords and the licensed trade. We have had two major meetings, and consultants and a facilitator have worked throughout the summer to prepare a report. We are working closely with the police and have consulted the Northern Ireland Office, the

Department for Social Development, the Department for Regional Development and other agencies.

The Member will know that it is not possible to guarantee anything. All that I can say to him is that the level of engagement has been much higher and more intense than it has been at any previous time. After last year's events, I decided that it was necessary for the Executive to take the lead on the situation. We have done that throughout the past year, and I hope that our actions bear fruit. We have engaged heavily with students and the student body because, at the end of the day, their members are involved in the problem. However, people from outside the area come into it to exploit the situation. The PSNI has a clear role in that area. I do not want to consider it a law and order situation, but I hope that the measures that we have taken will help to alleviate the situation.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his progress report. Given that virtually all respondents to the stakeholder forum's initial piece of work attached high importance to the question of compulsory landlord registration, has the Minister discussed the matter with any other Ministers, particularly the Minister for Social Development?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As the Member may be aware, there has been extensive communication between the various Departments, and it is perfectly obvious that a multi-agency and multi-Department approach has been taken to the matter. The Member will know from his experience in other places that there has been an underlying planning issue in that area for a long time. People ignored local representatives' advice year after year.

That said, the whole area has been taken over by local landlords who rent out houses for multiple occupation. The local residents feel marginalised, pressurised and, in some cases, intimidated. I can assure the Member that all the agencies that we could find and that have a role have been engaged up to ministerial level.

Mr McDevitt: Mr Speaker, I will take this opportunity to thank you and your staff, and colleagues from all parties, for the warm welcome that you have given me.

As the Minister is no doubt aware and as Mr Spratt pointed out, the St Patrick's Day celebrations are now upon us. Last week, Ms Ramsey kindly provided me with a copy of the response from the University of Ulster. In that response, the university advocated the extension of extra powers to the police to deal with situations such as those that occurred in the Holylands, and said that it would support emergency legislation for the extension of on-the-spot fines by the police in such situations. What is the Minister's opinion of that?

Furthermore, does the Minister have an update on the proposed schools outreach programme that was to be undertaken? What numbers of schools have been contacted across this region? Has there been a positive uptake of that programme?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: As my colleague said, that was more of a maiden speech than a question. *[Laughter.]* I suspect that the warm welcome that the Member has received in this place will no doubt be short-lived.

I cannot be precise about the school outreach programme, but I will write to the Member about that. We have had extensive discussions with the police about the Holylands issue, but I do not see this as a purely law and order situation. I was there at 11.00 pm on St Patrick's night last year, and the idea of PSNI officers going around issuing spot fines did not strike me as something that would be very successful. There were other issues, such as the inability to go into a garden where a lot of young people were gathered. Paul Goggins, the Northern Ireland Office Minister of State, has been represented in the discussions with the stakeholder forum, and I have written to him. The police have been heavily involved, but the idea is that we should avoid having to involve them.

I do not want to see police Land Rovers in the Holylands at 7.00 am on St Patrick's Day to occupy the ground. I want people to celebrate and have an enjoyable day; that is the way it should be. Unfortunately, some elements from outside see an opportunity to have a bit of a rumble and to attack the police and whatever other authority figures might be in the area. Sadly, the people who get the real hammering are the students who want to go about their business and the unfortunate residents who are subjected to those disturbances all the time, not just on one day of the year.

Ms Lo: I commend the Minister for his effort in co-ordinating the work on the issue in south Belfast. However, there is a need for ongoing inter-agency work, because there are so many different issues that contribute to the bigger problem on St Patrick's Day. The misuse of drink has been a big problem in the area. Has there been any progress on licensing issues and on addressing the low cost of drink?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I know that my colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is looking at that. There is quite a lot of evidence to suggest that the unit price of alcohol is an issue. The licensed trade was represented on the stakeholder forum, and it is promoting a code of practice among its membership. Some might say that such a code of practice might be fairly weak, but I welcome any progress in this area.

Nevertheless, I believe that there should be a national decision on the price of a unit of alcohol. I am

not against people having a good time, but what I saw last St Patrick's Day, and what has been seen in other situations throughout the city on other occasions, is not about having a good time. It goes beyond that, and, unfortunately, a lot of young people frequently get hurt, and others get criminal records. The licensed trade must be extremely careful in its response. In certain supermarkets, however, large amounts of alcohol can sometimes be bought for less than water.

3.15 pm

Training Programmes: East Londonderry

3. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many people who have been made redundant in East Londonderry in the last two years have entered retraining programmes. (AQO 635/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department does not collect information that identifies individuals who enrol on training programmes after being made redundant. The Department is notified when more than 20 people are made redundant. During 2008 and up to November 2009, there were 1,035 redundancies in the East Londonderry constituency. The figure for 2008 was 863, which was mainly a reflection of the closure of Seagate Technology in Limavady. Workers who are made redundant are eligible for early entry, on a voluntary basis, to Steps to Work, which is the Department's main employment programme. From 1 April 2008 to 30 November 2009, some 2,280 people started on the Steps to Work and New Deal programmes in the East Londonderry constituency.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that most of those who undertake those training and skills programmes are endeavouring to gain employment in the small and medium-sized enterprise sector or wish to become self-employed, how adaptable are those programmes in preparing people for those types of employment?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department's current suite of programmes is infinitely more flexible than that of a number of years ago. As the Member will know, someone who becomes unemployed can attempt to form his or her own business, and he or she will retain benefits for up to 26 weeks to help with that opportunity. That is the most flexible scheme possible. If an individual spots a genuine opportunity to get a job, a variety of schemes is available, and we will help as best we can. Rather than having a situation in which more people chase fewer positions, we must concentrate on stimulating jobs. I stress that the suite of options that we now have at our disposal is as good as we have ever had.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. How do those recent figures for Steps to Work compare with figures that were released last week showing that unemployment is on the increase? Does the Minister envisage the recent Budget statement having a negative impact on unemployment? Although that was issued from a different Department, there are issues about reskilling and upskilling. I am concerned because, if the Minister is saying that more people are joining the Steps to Work programme, surely the unemployment figures should have come down?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: It is true that the unemployment figure rose slightly, but the rate of growth slowed significantly, as was the case nationally. The Northern Ireland figure remains lower than that for the rest of the UK, significantly lower than that in the Republic and below the European average. That, of course, is no relief to those who are currently unemployed or worried about unemployment. If I may make a political point, sometimes the bubble within which we occupy ourselves in this place is some distance from the worries and concerns of ordinary people who are worried about their jobs, education and health. At times, our list of priorities differs from theirs.

I assure the Member, however, that the Department works with the local authorities. In the East Londonderry area we worked with Limavady Borough Council, Coleraine Borough Council and Derry City Council on, for example, job fairs. All the help that we provide is through partnership at a local level.

The Member asked why unemployment figures are not going down. Unfortunately, the number of redundancies is increasing in certain sectors. That is particularly true of manufacturing and services, from which more and more people have been added to the unemployment register. Today, approximately 47% more people are on the register than 12 months ago.. That gives some sense of the additional workload that our systems have had to accommodate.

Mr Dallat: The figures for East Derry are startling, particularly on a day when there appears to be grave political instability. What means does the Minister have to track training schemes to ensure that people are not in a revolving door, joining scheme after scheme? What opportunities are there for employers to evaluate courses? I thank the Minister for his efforts to date in my constituency, which must be among the worst affected.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: All levels of training are subject to quality assessment by the Education and Training Inspectorate. Therefore, a regime is in place to ensure quality. The Member asked whether we are going around in circles, and the fact that that was happening was one of the criticisms of

the previous New Deal arrangements. I believe that the new arrangements are of a higher quality.

We need to conduct what are described as longitudinal studies. We are carrying out studies on the new contract arrangements that were entered into. I accept that they did not start off as vigorously as they should have done, but they are coming on. The training providers have performance indicators for the schemes that inform the Department whether it is getting value for money. I assure the Member that it is in our interests to ensure that such information is at our disposal.

I will consider whether a longitudinal study to evaluate and check against the risk that the Member raised should be carried out, and I am happy to write to the Member in that regard.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his responses and his efforts, not only in my constituency but in other employment black spots throughout Northern Ireland. Will the Minister briefly outline what retraining programmes are available?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: A variety of programmes is available. The programmes depend on the individual's particular circumstances. We have introduced a suite of services that has been particularly tailored to anyone with a disability or learning disabilities. Our staff are trained to identify those needs; that is an integral part of the process.

Several programmes are available to someone who signs on. The Member is familiar with the principal schemes, as he has joined me on at least one occasion in visiting some of the facilities. All-age apprenticeships are available, and we work closely with further education colleges. The Bridge to Employment scheme is a bespoke recruitment and pre-employment training programme designed to help people learn the skills needed to be job-ready from day one of their employment. Our Training for Success scheme is well known as the Department's major flagship scheme.

We have a sufficient variety of facilities at our disposal. The key factor is not just skilling unemployed people but upskilling many people who are already in employment. We must endeavour to have the prevention as well as the cure.

Management Skills

4. **Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assistance is being provided by his Department to promote investment in management skills and development during the economic downturn. (AQO 636/10)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I have made available a wide range of management and leadership programmes, which are aimed at meeting

the needs of new entrants right up to senior directors. Since March 2009, the Department has offered 100% funding across a range of approved programmes to enhance uptake of leadership and management development.

Almost 600 individual managers and 120 companies have been engaged to date. The successful initiative has been complemented by a dedicated and ongoing awareness-raising campaign across Northern Ireland. The Made Not Born campaign aims to show small and medium-sized enterprises the benefits that better leadership and management can bring to business.

As outlined in Minister Foster's earlier statement and highlighted in the independent review of economic policy report, Members will note that my Department has collaborated with Invest NI in the development of an integrated framework for management and leadership to improve support in that important area.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The publication 'Management Matters in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland' places special emphasis on small and medium-sized enterprises. Will the Minister outline what steps he has taken to develop management capabilities in that area?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Member hits on a point that is dear to my heart. The vast majority of businesses in Northern Ireland are small, and perhaps the greatest difficulties arise for such businesses. Members can imagine that it is extremely difficult for a small business, in which the proprietor may carry out multiple jobs, to allow a staff member to spend time training away from the company. The irony is that companies that invest in training help their long-term survival prospects by doing so. We offer management and leadership training at nil cost to a company. I have tried to maintain the 100% funding because I believe that that is the best way in which we can contribute in that area.

The second way in which we contribute is by trying to make companies aware of the options that are available to them. The Department's contribution has been a combination of those two measures: offering management training at nil cost to a company and making companies aware of the significance of receiving extra training. All the reports and evidence throughout these islands are clear that the more effort and resources a company puts into training, the better that company's survival chances will be.

Mr O'Loan: I fully support the Minister's work on management and leadership development programmes. In light of the significant cuts to departmental spending that were announced in the recent budgetary review for 2010-11, is the Minister in a position to say whether he will be able to protect those important programmes from spending cuts?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I cannot anticipate an announcement from my colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I would be happy to make the announcement for him, but that is not possible. However, I can tell the Member that I have placed much emphasis on this area of activity. The 100% funding was to be brought in only for a limited time, but I agreed to extend the period during which it is available.

My Department's spending power was due to increase by more than 6% in 2010-11. Therefore, I have directed any efficiencies and reductions required by the Executive into areas in which growth was already due to take place. That approach to the proposals may mean that growth is restricted rather than any actual cuts having to be made in cash terms. I should also point out that the Executive are considering how they can create more efficiencies across the public sector. If they achieve further efficiencies on pay, for example, the sums of money generated will be put back into the pot, and Departments will have to reduce their spending by less.

Mr Savage: I also congratulate the Minister on the schemes that he has brought forward. Are any of those schemes available to the agriculture industry?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am sorry that my colleague from North Belfast is not in the Chamber because he could have prompted me in some of my responses.

The schemes are available throughout Northern Ireland. The Department for Employment and Learning deals primarily with individuals. In other words, the services that we provide are people-driven rather than geographically driven.

As the Member knows, we also work very closely with the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise. I am satisfied that many of the growth industries and businesses of the future will be based in rural areas. Therefore, if the opportunity presents itself, we have sufficient flexibility to direct training towards any areas in which we believe growth will take place.

3.30 pm

Furthermore, we are looking closely at what options we can produce with the colleges of further education. In their rapid response programme to the economic downturn, they produced a whole suite of measures that can be rolled out. I assure the Member that the situation regarding rural areas is kept very much at the forefront of our minds. At the very highest level, extra PhDs were sought three years ago, and extra money was received to do that. I assure the Member that the agriculture sector was included in that scheme, along with other STEM subjects that were referred to earlier by the Minister of Education. We attach the highest priority to that sector.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Universities: Protestant Students

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to bring forward measures to ensure that more students from a Protestant background are encouraged to opt for universities in Northern Ireland as their first choice. — [Mr Easton]

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion and I thank all of the Members who contributed to the debate. I recognise that we have covered a lot of ground today, but I will try to address as many of the points that were made during the debate as possible.

This subject has attracted a good deal of interest in the Chamber and beyond. Higher education plays a very significant role in the recovery of our economy and in Northern Ireland's continued future growth prospects. In this country, we must seek to secure a sustainable and globally competitive economy. Members will be aware that, to achieve that, we must move from a position that relies on low costs to compete to one that is based on higher value-added products and services, innovation, creativity and high workforce skills.

Increasing workforce skills and, in particular, increasing the proportion of the workforce with higher education and intermediate level skills will be key to achieving the objective of a competitive economy. During their careers, those who have a degree level qualification will, on average, earn 30% more than those with no qualifications. However, higher education is about much more than just getting a degree or a well-paid job: it is about personal fulfilment, forging new relationships and friendships, and developing skills in preparation for the rest of one's adult life. Above all, it is about investing in the future.

In 2008, over 9,600 Northern Ireland school leavers entered first year in higher education institutions throughout the United Kingdom. Of those, 2,500 students chose to leave Northern Ireland to study in Great Britain. It has already been stated that 1,140 were Protestant and 1,060 were Catholic, and the rest were of no, or other, religion. In addition, 1,025 Northern Ireland domiciled students enrolled in higher education courses in the Republic of Ireland's institutions, which is a decrease of 3% from 2007-08. However, although no breakdown of the religious composition of that group is available, it is fair to say that, anecdotally, a very high percentage of that group was from the Catholic community.

A number of recent studies have challenged previously held perceptions that young people are

compelled to travel to study due to a lack of higher education places in Northern Ireland, or that more Protestants than Catholics choose to study in GB due to a perceived chill factor for Protestants in Northern Ireland universities. I will spend a wee bit of time on this issue because it goes to the heart of the debate. There are a number of misconceptions that require addressing. The Equality Commission's research update of May 2008 stated that some of the factors that influenced educational migration included personal choice, level of affluence and higher education policy. There is little recent evidence of political chill factors impacting on educational migration.

Further to that, one of my early decisions as Minister was to appoint Professor Bob Osborne to carry out some work in that area. Published in 2008, his research indicated that 1.5% of respondents felt that Queen's University was not welcoming to the Catholic community, while 2.9% felt that it was not welcoming to the Protestant community. The University of Ulster's figure for Protestants was 2.6%. To all intents and purposes, the number of students who felt that they faced a chill factor in those two institutions was next to negligible. I would have preferred those readings to have been nil, but, given the background, those figures are very convincing.

People must remember a number of things. In the 1998-2003 Executive, a ministerial predecessor of mine, Sean Farren, raised the maximum student number cap by 1,000 places, which went some way towards dealing with the insufficient provision. In his remarks, Mr O'Loan hit the right tone, because different factors are at play. If we increase the number of student places, some individuals who would leave in the current circumstances may not do so, because entry-level standards might be lower. On the other hand, the evidence in Bob Osborne's report showed that a lot of people left because they wanted to. The Department calls such people determined leavers. Happily, the percentage of determined leavers is lower today.

I do not doubt that Mr Craig's remarks about the situation when he was at university may well have reflected the situation at that stage. However, folks, circumstances have changed. Regardless of their religious persuasion, young people do not see our institutions as a cold place. Importantly, it should be pointed out that the number of people who are not expressing any religious identification is also growing.

The big thing that is being missed in the debate, although it was touched upon by Mr O'Loan, is the role of the Department of Education's activities. The underlying problem is the failure to get a balance in educational achievement in the community at a much earlier stage, well before the point at which people come to university. That is the area to which we must draw attention.

There is no doubt that, in particular, Protestants from secondary schools are far less likely to opt for higher education. The statistics to prove that are there. However, the fault for that lies not with universities but with the system at a much earlier stage, and there is no question that that must be addressed. My Department can play a role through various schemes, such as the University of Ulster's absolutely excellent Step-Up programme, which I have been asked to extend; a request that I am considering. That first class scheme involves the university engaging with schools much earlier, so that young people know what to expect at university. Step-Up is designed to reduce the number of dropouts and the shock to new students.

To Members who asked what support my Department was offering, the answer is a broad range, financial and other. Indeed, there are people in my Department concentrating on widening access to universities here, because that is what it is about. We understand that we have a problem, and departmental staff are working on it full time to bring proposals to me. I have engaged with those staff, and they know that my very clear view is that work has to be done.

I must take issue with Mr Craig over one of his comments, and I cannot let the debate close without dealing with it. He said that there was nothing to attract a person from a Protestant background into our universities.

I cannot stand over that statement, which is totally untrue. Our universities are much improved institutions, and they have a long tradition of success. Indeed, Queen's University recently became a member of the Russell Group of universities and, just before Christmas last year, was named entrepreneurial university of the year for the United Kingdom. In the past five or six years, the research assessment exercise (RAE) ratings for the University of Ulster and Queen's University have dramatically improved both institutions' positions in the United Kingdom. Mr Craig's statement is simply not true.

Furthermore, in 2008, the research profile that the RAE panel produced for history at Queen's University graded 60% of its research activity as world leading or internationally excellent, and 95% as internationally recognised or above. Similarly, in 2001, history at the University of Ulster was awarded a RAE rating of 4, with 5 being the top mark achievable, and:

"This result reflected the high quality of the publications of History staff and their success rate with MPhil and doctoral students. Historians at the university have always seen a thriving community of postgraduate students, both full-time and part-time, as contributing to the overall research culture of the subject."

That is evidence that, at both those levels, our universities are doing extremely well.

In May 2008, in 'Educational Migration and Non-return in Northern Ireland', a report prepared for the Equality Commission, it was stated:

"Widening access, in particular for boys and from the less affluent Protestant communities where there is an under-representation in the numbers progressing to HE, would increase numbers proceeding to HE who otherwise may not have considered this as an option. Any initiative aimed at widening access would need to be based on equality and thus not exclude individuals from either community."

It is clear, therefore, that this is a cross-departmental issue.

As a result of the research that we have carried out, I can tell the Member that the chill factor that may have existed 20 years ago is no longer there. People choose to go to our universities for a vast number of reasons. Having said that, I am acutely aware that many of our brightest people do leave, and my Department has been doing what it can to get them back. We ran the C'mon Over campaign, and our roadshow has been to universities in Scotland and England. Indeed, the last roadshow that I held, in early autumn, was in Dublin, which was the one area to which we had not gone. We had to have a gap in the roadshow programme owing to the economic recession, and, at the moment, I am not able to continue with them because the employers whom I brought with me and who had real jobs to offer students who came along no longer have those jobs. I want to get everybody back, but we cannot hermetically seal people into Northern Ireland. At the end of the day, people from a unionist background do not consider themselves to be leaving anywhere. In their terms, they are simply moving to another part of the country.

I want to do everything that I can, and since I have been the Minister for Employment and Learning I have put a great deal of effort into trying to grow the amount of money that goes into research in our universities, because I believe that that will be the source of high-quality jobs in future. From talking to students, I get the impression that the courses that are offered, their own potential, and their long-term economic future determine where they want to go. In addition, we were all young once, and anyone from the greater Belfast area will know that, for many people, going to the University of Ulster or Queen's University is just a matter of going up the road, which does not seem like going away to university. Many young people want to get away for the full student experience, and we cannot deny them that experience.

Nevertheless, there are things that we can do. We can make a case for more student places, and I am looking at a number of proposals for raising the number of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) places. Indeed, there is a proposal on my desk from the University of Ulster for Magee College, and I know that we have been putting a great deal of effort

into encouraging people to study STEM subjects. However, looking at the myriad subjects from which people want to be able to choose, no single university, or even two universities, can offer everything.

3.45 pm

Academia is a colossal area. On balance, the situation today is radically different to the one that pertained a number of years ago. We have an excellent higher education system, and I cannot detect a chill factor. Evidence shows that there will always be the odd anecdotal case, but racial issues, and others, can arise in any university, and we do not want those any more than anybody else does. Generally speaking, we are on the right track. However, the real problem lies further down the education spectrum. The real reason why more Protestants are not coming forward is that fewer of them are applying to university, because fewer of them are getting the relevant qualifications at school. That is where the problem lies, and the real solution to the problem lies there. We are taking steps to address that, and we will continue to do so. We are looking at our proposals for widening access and, undoubtedly, with respect to policy, there is no case to answer. Protestant working-class students are under-performing. I will not argue for one minute about that, but, as far as we are concerned, there are right and wrong ways of going about addressing that.

Mr Speaker: I call Thomas Buchanan to conclude and make a winding-up speech. The Member has 10 minutes in which to speak.

Mr Buchanan: I thank my colleague for bringing the motion to the House, and I thank all those Members who took part. The issue raised a bit of debate around the Chamber. I want to point out from the start that the motion has not been brought forward to exclude anyone from a university place, nor has it been brought forward to seek to exclude people from attending universities outside Northern Ireland. That has not been the reason for it. Some people have sought to politicise the motion, but we are simply asking the Minister to look at the issue again and put in place some sort of mechanism to encourage young Protestant students to stay in Northern Ireland and study at the universities here.

It used to be that many of our sixth formers were able to find suitable employment and build careers without going to universities, which usually meant that they stayed in Northern Ireland. However, today most young people feel compelled to enter third-level education if they are to have any chance of getting a foot on the employment ladder. Therefore, universities play a more crucial role in society than ever before. During the Troubles, Protestant students tended to prefer to study in universities in Great Britain. They wanted to get out of troubled Northern Ireland, and

few of them returned. I suppose at that time we wished them well, but it was not good for Northern Ireland, and it caused many of us to despair for the future. Thankfully, the Troubles are, hopefully, behind us, but the problem remains that the exodus of Protestant students still continues.

In answer to a question that I tabled in October 2009, the Education Minister provided me with some figures for the 2008-09 academic year, the latest year for which figures are available. The figures reveal that 56% of places in higher education in Northern Ireland were taken up by Roman Catholics, 37% were taken up by Protestants, and 7% by others. That continuing imbalance is not good. In fact, it is simply unacceptable.

As Northern Ireland moves out of its troubled past and we have a much more peaceful society, we have to ask why Protestants are still going across the water. There are several answers to that question. For example, more Protestant students live in the east of the Province, and many of them live within travelling distance to our local universities, yet they feel the excitement of going across the water to study and to get a different experience from studying here at home. However, there are other more worrying reasons why they are leaving. Sadly, our local universities are still perceived by many Protestants as being more welcoming to the nationalist community than they are to the unionist community. For example, Queen's University —

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am deeply grateful to the Member for giving way, as I appreciate that it is unusual to make an intervention during a Member's winding-up speech. However, I must point out that the evidence from the 2008 report by Professor Osborne, which I sponsored, does not provide that information. That is the point. The difference in perceptions and chill factors between the various religions is 1%, 2% or 3%; it is extremely small. I ask the Member to revisit that point if he would be so kind.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his intervention. However, let us be clear: not only is the chill factor a concern in the Democratic Unionist Party, it is a concern in the Minister's own party. His party colleague Tom Elliott said that he was shocked to discover how many more Roman Catholics stay in the Province to study, which suggests that there is a Protestant brain drain. That difficulty and perception exists throughout the entire unionist community; it is not focused only in the Democratic Unionist Party. The Assembly must be realistic and look at that matter. Since the figures speak for themselves, I do not want to repeat those that were cited in the debate. They will be available to everyone in the Hansard report.

Although local universities are perceived to be a cold house for Protestants, there is no doubt that many

seek to improve that image and to be seen as a warm place for students from that community. That is to be welcomed. Universities have a responsibility to take a long, hard look at how they promote themselves to Protestants. The Assembly and the Executive must take a proactive role on the matter.

The Executive have, quite rightly, placed the economy at the heart of the Programme for Government. One of its key aims is to attract high-value-added, well-paid jobs that will provide security and stability. If Northern Ireland is to attract such jobs, it is vital that local graduates have the required skills that are sought by potential foreign investors. If students cannot be kept in Northern Ireland and choose to go elsewhere, that will create a vacuum that is detrimental to the economy.

Many Protestant students focus on STEM subjects — science, technology, engineering and maths — which are key to the economy's development. Closer working relationships between universities and colleges are needed. If they were properly funded, colleges could take in students who drop out of STEM subjects courses at Queen's University. The Assembly must look at that issue if it wants to encourage students to stay in Northern Ireland. STEM subjects provide a strong basis on which to mount a strong stay at home campaign in schools and universities, particularly among Protestant sixth formers.

I want to pick up on issues that were raised in the debate. I am aware that time is moving on quickly. The proposer of the motion, Alex Easton, spoke of the variation in the numbers of students in each of the universities in Northern Ireland. The figures, which are documented, show that many more nationalists than Protestants study at Northern Ireland's universities. The Assembly must deal with those stubborn facts.

As regards funding inequalities, 69% of Catholic students receive information about funding compared with 55% of Protestant students, and the Assembly must look at that issue to determine what can be done to provide that information.

Mr Leonard: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buchanan: My time is almost up. The proposer of the motion, Alex Easton, called for a robust action plan to address that vital issue and to stop the perceived discrimination of Protestant students that results in their moving away from Northern Ireland. That is an issue that we have to look at.

I have not got time to go into what the other Members who spoke said, but I think that most of them admitted that there was a difficulty and that a lot of Protestant students were leaving Northern Ireland and going to study elsewhere. That fact was acknowledged by almost every Member who spoke, and it is something that we need to address.

I welcome the Minister's response, and I agree with what he said. We need to take a step back into the education system and further back into our schools and, subsequently, our colleges. We need to start the process there and build on it. That will help to alleviate the problems that we face regarding our students in Northern Ireland.

Question put and negatived.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Location of Public Sector Jobs

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

Mr P Ramsey: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the significant social, regional development, economic and long-term environmental benefits of a programme of decentralisation of public sector jobs; calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to reconsider his stated position on the implementation of the independent review of policy on the location of public sector jobs; welcomes the Minister's recognition that it requires an Executive decision; and calls on the Executive to discuss the issue at their next meeting with a view to taking immediate action to fully implement the review's recommendations by assessing options for decentralising public sector jobs within all government Departments and public sector agencies.

I welcome the Minister to this afternoon's debate. I hope that he will be able to respond to the debate and, considering the concerns, rumours and goodnight Irenes that we have been hearing all afternoon, I hope that it will not be his last opportunity to respond to a debate.

We are talking about the review of policy on the location of public sector jobs, which I will refer to as the Bain report. It has an impressive set of authors. They consulted widely, and they carefully considered conclusions that should be taken seriously. The Bain report cites three main arguments for the redistribution of jobs, which are:

"first, to enhance the delivery of public services by improving operational efficiency and effectiveness; second, to promote more balanced regional economic development and reduce social deprivation; and third, to promote sustainability by achieving environmental benefits through changing commuter patterns, operating in more energy-efficient buildings, and helping to revitalise the economic and social infrastructure of local communities."

The SDLP agrees that those are worthy goals.

We in the SDLP are particularly concerned at the spatial imbalance of economic development and well-being across Northern Ireland. Decentralisation is one of a number of investments that government can make to redress the imbalance that has historically existed in Northern Ireland. That can be addressed only through delivering strategic regional investment.

I ask the Minister and the House to give careful consideration to the type of Northern Ireland that we want to develop. Are we satisfied that a large proportion of Northern Ireland has serious infrastructural deficits, which lead to high unemployment and low wage employment? If we do not invest, why should, and how can, the private sector invest? Do we want to develop the entire region or just the subregions that

give the best short-term value for money return? Or, will we ensure that every subregion in Northern Ireland is developed? That would ensure that every part of Northern Ireland works for all of its people.

The relocation of public sector jobs can create a win-win situation from social, environmental and economic perspectives. The Bain report makes that point. It states:

"In France, Finland, Ireland and the UK, relocation has been used to create jobs and encourage economic development in provincial regions, while at the same time reducing inflationary pressures in property and labour markets close to capital cities."

4.00 pm

There is a clear imbalance in development in Northern Ireland. The Minister will be fully aware of the figures for employment and unemployment across the North. The Minister will also be aware that the low levels of per capita GDP, particularly in the west, result from complex reasons and historical decisions and actions. Some of those relate to the sustained campaign by the Provisional IRA against the economy and jobs, when businesses and people were attacked. Some relate to historic Government decisions on transport and university education in particular.

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

There is a strong case for decentralisation to locations in the west. The west is the main region of high unemployment outside any reasonable travel-to-work distance from Belfast. Therefore, for good, sound economic and justifiable reasons, it is a natural region to which to relocate jobs. Derry is the major hub of the north-west, which includes Strabane, which is also a town of very high employment but is within easy reach of the city of Derry. The Bain report is particularly clear on Derry's position as a prime candidate for the relocation of jobs. The report states that only Derry has the capacity to sustain large grade-A offices of the type required for large-scale relocation. It is well outside the Belfast travel-to-work region, and it has a university campus, which means that it would be able to supply suitably qualified staff in that locality. The west is also geographically suitable for the location of cross-border bodies. The SDLP agrees with the Bain report's recommendation that there should be a presumption against new bodies being located in Belfast.

The SDLP understands that there are up-front costs — relocation is not free — and it concurs with the Bain report's recommendation that:

"any business-case process should ensure that the long-term, non-monetary benefits receive primary consideration and should not be determined by value-for-money considerations alone."

Judging by his previous comments, the Minister of Finance and Personnel is clearly concerned about the cost implications of decentralisation. However, it is not clear whether he supports decentralisation in principle

as a means of creating better balanced economic development, environmental benefits and a better service provision. Perhaps the Minister will comment on those three areas later.

As with many things, timing is crucial. It is rarely the case that decisions are made when all stars are aligned. The SDLP recognises the difficult economic circumstances that exist. Clearly, it would be better if we were not in recession. However, we are conscious that there is an intention to invest in upgrading public estates. We are going through the RPA process, and new public bodies are being created. This is a period of change and investment, and that is why it is crucial that the right location decisions are made now. Once new systems become embedded and refurbishments are complete, relocation for any Government will become much more difficult.

There are key social, environmental and long-term economic reasons for decentralisation. This is the right time to carry decentralisation forward. I appeal to the House and the Executive to give serious consideration to the Bain report's recommendations. The people of Northern Ireland are watching us closely, and they want to know whether the Executive will provide only caretaker subsistence investment in Northern Ireland or whether they have the vision, strength, intelligence and leadership necessary to carry this and other long-term initiatives to develop every region across Northern Ireland.

There was concern when the Minister put a damper on everyone's enthusiasm by saying that, for financial reasons, now was not the time for decentralisation. We want to know whether the Minister believes that he made the right decision.

Many thousands of jobs have been haemorrhaged in the north-west in recent times, so is now not the time to invest properly and for good social and economic reasons? It is clear from the Bain report that:

"Derry should be a primary site for the relocation to absorb a substantial number of jobs in the... short term."

The areas named for the relocation of public sector jobs in the Bain report were Derry, Omagh, Craigavon, Newry, Ballymena and Coleraine. Those are all areas of need, and the Members who represent those constituencies will no doubt make that point. The criteria set out by the Bain report include regional economic balance; labour market capacity, which involves establishing whether there is a market and whether the regions have the capacity to support the workforce; whether those jobs can be made sustainable — and they can; whether those regions have the transport or public transport infrastructure to develop on a theme of decentralisation; and whether a clustering effect will create other employment opportunities.

We must know whether the Minister and his Department will ensure that the Executive commission an independent report that will take data from across Northern Ireland and bring key people together in order to inform opinion. However, there is not much point in the Executive and the Department constructing an independent report unless the areas that need to be challenged and brought forward are prioritised. We must ensure that that report is delivered on and that yet another position paper is not binned.

Mr McLaughlin: I welcome the motion; I support it and will be voting for it. The issue of decentralisation is not one that can be judged solely in the here and now. I, too, was disappointed when the Minister indicated that his intention was effectively to bin the Bain report, because decentralisation is a key factor in investing in recovery, which is one of the key principles that the Executive must address. I do not have any particular prescience about how the current situation will resolve itself. However, for the purposes of the debate, I will assume that there will be an Executive and an opportunity for us all to work together to address that key priority, which was correctly identified in the Programme for Government and the Budget.

The invest to save initiative that was identified by the Minister during the debate on the draft expenditure plans for 2010-11 in January is very interesting and progressive. Indeed, in my contribution to that debate, I welcomed that initiative and congratulated the Minister on its introduction, and I feel that the same concept could also be applied to decentralisation. There would inevitably be short-term set-up costs, but there have been remarkable and revolutionary developments in technology, particularly communication technology.

There are well-established and road-tested techniques in remote working, working from home, hot-desking and the establishment of satellite offices. Indeed, there have been some very interesting experiments in the South, where shared service centres have been established to deal with the consequences of the peripheralisation of the towns and cities that lie outside the Pale and the Dublin conurbation. That principle has been established and the effectiveness of the approach demonstrated. It would, therefore, be short-sighted of the Executive if they did not examine and bring forward pilot projects to demonstrate the value of addressing the need to rebuild the economy, to identify the type of economy that will sustain itself in future and to deal with the historical legacy of underdevelopment.

I make the point repeatedly that this is a tiny geographical entity. There are no excuses for not providing equality of opportunity or for not dealing with the legacy of disparity and underdevelopment. It

is not the fault of any party in the Assembly that those patterns emerged. They have emerged over many decades, and our responsibility is to try to do something about them. The Bain report, with its modest proposals, provides an opportunity for us all to work together to begin to address those issues that continue to affect our community and could well continue to do so in the future.

We have sound economic reasons for taking action on the Bain report. There are allied environmental reasons for reducing the number of people on the roads, for reducing congestion to enhance the future development of this city and for ensuring that we deliver effective government and services cost-effectively. That does not mean sticking, in all circumstances, with the old system and the old patterns of government deployment. It does not mean ignoring, in a Luddite fashion, the developments in technology and communication. We can deliver those services in a way that does not require people to get up at the crack of dawn every day to commute to Belfast, do their day's work and then commute back home again, with all the consequences that that brings, such as cost, inefficiencies and stress for commuters.

There is an opportunity here, and I exhort the Minister to reconsider his position and to consider the benefits of working with his Executive colleagues. Let us devise the pilot programmes and bring them forward.

Mr McNarry: To embark on an expensive scheme to decentralise civil and public service jobs right across Northern Ireland — conservative estimates suggest that it would lead to additional costs of some £40 million — at a time when the Finance Minister has asked Departments for £370 million of expenditure cuts is really not on. There are many things that we would like to do and which, in the future, I trust we will have the opportunity to do. Implementing the Bain report, either partially or in its entirety, may well be one of those things.

However, as we debate the issue today, some of the representatives of areas that could benefit from the report are trying to bring the House down. This is not the time to do it. We have a fiscal duty to be prudent and an overriding duty to maintain the House. We have a duty to be good custodians of the public purse. At a time when we face the worst recession since the 1930s, when unemployment has doubled in the last year, when 50% more people are claiming jobseeker's allowance than were claiming it a year ago, when we have an economic inactivity rate that is 30% higher than the national average and when the cancellation and postponement of government and school infrastructure and development projects have led to the loss of many construction jobs, we find that some people stand accused today of a wrecking exercise and are failing their electorate.

Some people — namely, the DUP's republican partners — set policing and justice as a higher priority than what is, for other people, the struggle of putting bread on the table and keeping a roof over their head. I understand the intentions behind the motion and the frustrations of the proposers, but, given ongoing events elsewhere, I ask Members to look around them. Who is listening? What is the point in bringing business to the Floor of the House when turmoil rules instead of democracy? When are we all going to say that there should be no more pretend business until there is an established, reliable and stable Executive who can secure public confidence? This dysfunctional, squabbling, two-party coalition Executive is making a laughing stock of the rest of us, and it really cannot continue.

No one is knocking my office door down to demand the devolution of policing and justice powers as a top priority. They would want to identify more with a debate such as this, and those who say anything different are reading the public mood wrongly. The public want us to activate urgently issues that are connected to job creation and protection. They want us to determine how we might shore up the economy, which is already alarmingly dependent on the public sector. They also want us to establish how we might make things better for business and to find ways to protect the people who are most in need of our help. They want action on all fronts; they do not want distractions, such as those that are occurring today, from the priorities.

4.15 pm

Bain's committee did not invent relocation; rather, its report was a reaction to an idea that had been around for some time. Decentralising government jobs is a politician's issue. At present, we should be spending less time on that matter and more time on dealing with the issues that are concerning people. We must handle those issues competently.

I would welcome areas in my constituency of Strangford benefiting from relocation. As an Assembly, however, we must take a broader view and discharge our financial duty properly in the interests of all. We have got to put that in front of us all at a time when cuts are the order of the day. It is more important to direct public money into front line services.

For those reasons, I cannot support the motion, and I ask the cavalier republicans — a contradiction in terms — to please get a grip on themselves and to listen to what people in the community want, rather than throwing up garbage to the House today and perhaps for the next few days.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call Dr Stephen Farry, I ask Members to stick to the subject.

Dr Farry: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, as the horse bolts.

I have some sympathy for the motion, and I am open-minded on the issue in general. However, I am not entirely uncritical of it. I agree with Mr McNarry that it is not valid to push the issue in the current context. Each of the report's individual proposals on relocation would probably fail under Treasury green book guidance, and, even if a political decision were taken to override that and make a leap of faith, we would have to face up to the fact that considerable costs would be involved in any decisions on relocation.

The debate comes in the context of some difficult economic and financial circumstances. It would be difficult to implement the report's proposals in any context but, in today's circumstances, that is an impossible ask. If we were to do it, it would be at the opportunity cost of doing something else, to use an economic concept on which the Finance Minister keeps lecturing us.

Mrs D Kelly: Mr McNarry also referred to the financial cost of implementing the report's proposals. The review of public administration also has a cost, yet we do not hear of that being shelved on the basis of cost.

Dr Farry: I do not necessarily disagree with the Member's point.

It is important that we seek to prioritise our economic resources for protecting and growing the economy and for protecting and sustaining our public services. We must also bear in mind the sheer stress that would be put on what is currently an overstretched public sector. We must be responsible in what we ask for. During devolution and in recent years, Departments have been asked to undergo considerable changes, some of which have been productive and some of which have not. We must bear in mind how the system can take the strain that has been asked of it. An extreme example is LPS, which has been asked to implement a huge raft of changes in rating. It has struggled to do so and is only now coming round to dealing with those issues.

I can certainly understand and identify with the argument about the poor distribution of economic activity and wealth in Northern Ireland. To some extent, that mirrors a wider point that I and others have made about regional imbalances across the United Kingdom, where three out of 12 of the NUTS regions are net contributors to the Treasury. Against that, though, we have to acknowledge the counter-argument about the tendency for jobs and economic activity to cluster and to concentrate. We then have to ask ourselves whether that clustering is benign or malign. Perhaps, when talking about the long-term future of Northern Ireland, we need to have a debate about whether there is enough balance.

At times, I become a little concerned and frustrated because our economic debates often become more

about the internal distribution of inward investment or jobs and about how the cake is distributed rather than about the overall size of the cake and the creation of wealth. Ultimately, as an Assembly, that has to be our main concern, and, in some senses, we will all benefit if we manage to make some progress on that issue.

It should also be borne in mind that public sector jobs are, in themselves, a poor substitute for private sector jobs. They do not create wealth; rather, they exist to provide an important service in helping the public with health and education, for example.

We should be somewhat concerned when we see a UK-wide pattern in which the British Government are shifting a lot of public sector jobs to the north of England and to Scotland. That becomes almost a surrogate for trying to create alternative forms of economic activity in areas that have suffered from deindustrialisation over the past 30 years. Therefore, let us have a balanced approach to job creation.

The issue about the distribution of public sector jobs in the greater Belfast area was missed in the Bain report. Relocation was deemed to be about moving jobs from the Stormont estate or Belfast city centre to other regions of Northern Ireland and ignoring the suburban ring, where a critical mass of people live. Many of those people commute to Stormont or to the centre of Belfast. It would be beneficial to move jobs to that suburban ring. There is a myth that there are a lot of Civil Service jobs in such areas, particularly in my constituency of North Down. However, it is worth bearing in mind that there are actually very few Civil Service jobs in North Down. A lot of civil servants who live there have to commute, and, as a result, they clog up the traffic in the mornings at the expense of other economic activities.

I have been lobbied about the location of public sector jobs, and I was very conscious of a suggestion that was made several years ago to move the headquarters of the Department of Education from Rathgael House to somewhere in Belfast. Even though that building is in an inferior state when compared to others, there was a clear sense from those who work in it, particularly those in lower grades, that they wanted to stay there because that is where they built their livelihoods and that is where their families were located. They did not want to have to relocate because of all the disruption that would have been involved. Therefore, the interests of workers who are well settled in their jobs should also be borne in mind. It is not in everyone's interests for jobs to be moved around like pieces on a chessboard.

Mr Weir: Given the surrounding circumstances, there is, as some Members pointed out, a slightly surreal aspect to this debate. Perhaps what is most surreal for me is that, during a debate about finance and personnel issues, I find myself largely agreeing

with Mr McNarry and Dr Farry. I do not know which of them should be more worried.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): You should be worried.

Mr Weir: Maybe I should be deeply worried. I should maybe revise my speech completely. I may disagree with a few of Mr McNarry's points; however, given the current spirit of unionist unity, I will not pick up on them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I did ask Members to stick to the motion and not to decentralise to other subjects.

Mr Weir: I shall try to centralise this debate and, indeed, my concerns about the motion.

There is no doubt about the sensitivity of the issue. We would all admit that there are sensitivities in all parties because this is an issue of geography more than anything else. Indeed, people from areas that could lose jobs will be fiercely defensive of the status quo, while people from areas that may gain jobs will have a strong desire for that movement to take place. Therefore, I suspect that there are nuances of positions in all parties about this issue, because, in many ways, it is a zero-sum game. It is not an issue of introducing new jobs; rather, it is a question of potentially shifting jobs. That is why the analogy with the RPA is awry. Although there may be some question marks about the overall cost of the RPA, at least it is aimed at saving money in the long run. At most, implementing the Bain report would create expensive dislocation costs with no particular financial gain. There may be gains and losses for individuals but, overall, there is no net financial gain to Northern Ireland as a whole.

As has been indicated, there are flawed assumptions behind both the Bain report and this motion. The idea that shifting jobs to one location means that there is a massive economic boost for the people in that area is highly questionable. Belfast is in second or third place as regards the number of public sector jobs per head of population; interestingly, Omagh has the highest number. One might think that having those jobs would be a massive boost to the Belfast economy, yet, of the 20 most deprived wards in Northern Ireland, 18 are in Belfast. Therefore, wealth does not necessarily follow the location of public sector jobs. Additionally, there is an assumption, fuelled by a parochial attitude, that having jobs in their area will mean that people will have only to walk a few hundred yards to their job, whereas, in reality, a much wider net is cast.

I agree with Mr Farry that one of the flawed aspects of the Bain report has been the attitude to greater Belfast. In the parochial attitude that I have described, locations such as north Down and Rathgael House are lumped in with Belfast. If certain plans were implemented, there would be a danger that public

sector jobs would be taken away from north Down, where there is a deficit of jobs, and transferred to the centre of Belfast. That is one of the flaws of this motion.

In many ways, Rathgael House is a good example. Many of the staff there have sought transfers to work there, in order to take care of local needs such as family responsibilities, care responsibilities and so on. We need to take a more imaginative approach, encourage flexible working and see where transfers can occur without the massive costs of relocation.

Northern Ireland is much smaller than other jurisdictions; it is not England, Scotland, Wales or the Republic of Ireland, and so issues of distance are not quite so crucial. Where relocation has been attempted on a large scale, whether in Scotland or the Republic of Ireland, it has not been an unalloyed success. In the Republic, things have largely ground to a halt; in Scotland, relocation has created major problems. Leaving aside the merits of relocation as a concept, the fatal flaw in this motion and in moving ahead with Bain now is affordability, given the current economic circumstances. We now have a situation where Departments will have to give up a total of £370 million in revenue and capital. Therefore, at this time when there is added pressure on a range of vital services, we cannot spend £40 million on a dubious plan of relocation.

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

Mr Weir: It would simply produce an additional burden, and that would be foolish.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Weir: I urge Members to vote against the motion.

Ms Anderson: Éirím chun tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún. I support the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I thank the proposers for tabling it. I welcome the motion's determination that the issue of decentralisation is for the Executive to decide. It is not for the Minister of Finance and Personnel or anyone else to decide unilaterally. I made that point when the Minister made his ill-advised comments in October.

The Minister talked about the cost of implementing the Bain report. He said that the estimated cost of relocating 5,000 public sector jobs as recommended by Bain — £40 million — was not affordable. However, as my colleague Mitchel McLaughlin pointed out last week, the Minister talked about the concept of invest to save, whereby we spend in the short term —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member tell us what services she will cut to get that £40 million? Choices must be made. From where will the £40 million come?

Ms Anderson: I am talking about invest to save, whereby we spend in the short term. I do not know

whether the Member was present for the Minister's contribution. We would benefit from that investment in the long term. I ask the Member, where is the value for money in maintaining an imbalanced regional development? Where is the value for money in maintaining what many regard as an ineffective top-heavy Civil Service?

4.30 pm

I stress that this debate is not, as some Members commented earlier, about Derry versus Belfast. A balanced economy is good for the North as a whole, and the Finance Minister should bear that in mind. He should also remember that the decision on whether to implement the Bain report's recommendations will be taken by the Executive, not him alone.

Sinn Féin supports the Bain review and its endorsement of the argument that public sector jobs should be spread evenly across the Six Counties. I know that the review was warmly received by the many civil servants who live in rural communities and in places such as Derry and Newry and who have to travel to Belfast for work every day. Obviously, those important issues must be managed in a sensitive manner for the benefit of public sector workers who may be affected by decentralisation. The core argument of the Bain report is that public sector employment should be part of a broader move towards a balanced approach to regional and economic development across the North, and it is one that Sinn Féin has long supported and advocated.

For its part, Sinn Féin will continue to approach the issue on the basis of equality and of addressing historical regional disparities. Indeed, Sinn Féin Ministers are actively seeking ways to decentralise Civil Service jobs to areas outside Belfast. It is well recognised — this has been demonstrated internationally — that the relocation of public sector jobs gives a significant uplift to the local economy in which they are situated. That is particularly true of areas such as Derry — stand up for Derry; I could not go without saying that — which Pat Ramsey and I represent, and which has suffered decades of neglect and underinvestment. Perhaps that explains the determination by some parties to defend the historic pattern of locating government jobs. I refer to the earlier comments of Mr McNarry and to the fact that the DUP and the UUP have defended other historical patterns, such as wanting unionism to be the largest party in the Six Counties, but “the times they are a-changin’”. We witnessed some of that antipathy in the debate on whether to declare the north-west as an area of special economic need. However, we will not allow that to derail us.

Redressing regional inequality is not just the right thing to do, it is a Programme for Government

commitment, and my party has no intention of letting up on its demand for that to be implemented. The relocation of government jobs is just one tangible measure that the Executive can and should take to help redress those inequalities, and I fully endorse the demand for immediate Executive talks with a view to implementing the Bain report in full. I support the motion and call on other Members to do so.

Mr G Robinson: I am pleased to speak on an issue that is of direct significance to my constituency of East Londonderry. Its two major towns are Coleraine and Limavady, which the Bain report suggests may benefit from the decentralisation of public sector jobs. That will be of tremendous benefit to many people throughout my constituency who commute daily to Belfast and other areas. Many people who live in other areas outside Belfast are also forced to commute long distances each day because their Civil Service jobs are based in Belfast. Therefore, moving public sector jobs to locations outside Belfast would reduce many of those journeys and alleviate the traffic problems that we encounter daily on the roads.

There are, however, many more details in the proposals that must be investigated. At a time when economic pressures are at the forefront of everyone's minds, a scheme that may cost upwards of £50 million cannot be entered into lightly. A value-for-money principle must be uppermost in all our minds. We cannot throw precious financial resources at the decentralisation of Civil Service jobs without being sure that there will be a good return for that investment. A huge number of issues in places such as Coleraine and Limavady would benefit from the investment of a tiny proportion of that money.

Other areas such as Scotland and the Republic of Ireland have already entered into a programme of decentralisation of public sector jobs. We must examine and learn from the problems that those schemes faced. There is no point in blindly following the proposals. We must study examples from other countries, learn about the problems that they encountered and ensure that we do not repeat their mistakes. The reason for comparing examples from elsewhere is to evaluate the benefits and pitfalls. The greatest potential benefit lies in locating new bodies in areas outside Belfast, and we should focus on that. The further decentralisation of public sector jobs should be examined in the future. That is important, because we must take into account that the current financial situation demands caution. We must also ensure that we achieve value for money from every penny that we spend.

In conclusion, I urge extreme caution in supporting the motion.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Members who tabled the motion for bringing the topic forward for discussion. I

agree entirely that Northern Ireland needs and deserves a public sector that is efficient, fair and rooted throughout Northern Ireland.

Although we are content with the many positive aspects of the Bain report, it is not perfect, and, therefore, I do not want it to be implemented to be in full, as intimated in the motion. The report failed to recognise inconsistencies in the current travel-to-work areas. A huge geographic variation exists within those areas. Is that a good judgement on which to base relocations?

My constituency of East Antrim is ranked as one of the lowest of the 18 parliamentary constituencies when it comes to public sector jobs, having only 2.4%, or 5,171, of the 219,000 jobs listed. That already low figure has decreased still further, with the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) office in Larne being earmarked for closure and relocation, changes happening in the Department for Social Development (DSD), centralisation in north Belfast, and a new processing office has opened in Ballymena.

Page 58 of the Bain report states that councils in East Antrim have among the lowest number of public sector jobs per 100 of the working age population. Larne has only eight public sector jobs for every 100 of the working age population, Carrickfergus has 8.2, and Newtownabbey has 10.3. Those figures compare with 35.6 public sector jobs in Belfast for every 100 of the working age population, 21.8 in Omagh and 19.2 in Londonderry.

Other areas are similarly affected. For example, the Ards council area has 8.5 public sector jobs for every 100 people. Again, the issue of huge variations within each travel-to-work area was not addressed by the review. It is not only an issue for areas west of the Bann, as some of the issues also affect areas in the east of the Province.

Members have failed to grasp the cost implication. It is easy to say that we should use money from the invest to save fund. However, to have money for that fund, a choice must be made to take it from other projects. I would wish for money to be diverted from other projects only if the long-term economic benefits were certain. Money should not be moved from one area merely for the luxury of re-juggling where civil servants are located.

Mr McLaughlin: I invited Members to consider an extremely worthwhile concept. I was not talking about redeploying the budget that has already been earmarked for a range of projects, all of which I support. I was merely recommending the concept.

Mr Beggs: All Members ought to know the severity of the finance proposals contained within the recent announcement. We have to save £370 million, and, for the Health Service alone, that amounts to £113,000 of

additional savings in the next financial year. However, proposals to relocate Civil Service jobs would incur an additional cost. How would that be paid for?

On Friday, I met the chief executive of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. I learned of the huge pressures facing that trust because of the increasing birth rate in the area. At the same time, the elderly population is increasing. Both place considerable demands on the Health Service and require particular resources. In addition, hospital outpatient referrals are up by 7% this year and attendance at accident and emergency departments is up by 8%. A decision to relocate civil service jobs means deciding not to provide money to front line services, and we must be careful that that does not happen.

When the Bain report was published, the Ulster Unionist Party gave guarded support to many of its recommendations. We noted that the relocation of public sector jobs would help to create a better and more balanced regional economy, encourage wealth creation and reduce economic disparity. However, we also stipulated that the Executive would have to ensure that value for money was at the forefront of any decisions that they took.

Mrs D Kelly: It strikes me that that has not been the practice thus far. For example, how can the Member explain away the appointment of four victims' commissioners? Where will the £118 million cost of the review of public administration be found?

Mr Beggs: It is for others to argue why there are four victims' commissioners instead of one.

The review of public administration and the reviews of other Departments and organisations present an opportunity to look at relocation where there are minimal set-up costs and where efficiencies can be shown. We must take great care when moving entire Departments and structures en masse. We must be careful to make sure that such moves will produce savings and that a new work arrangement will kick in at the same time. Such moves must be carefully planned so that savings are made, thus enabling reinvestment for the future.

We ought to learn from the Republic of Ireland's painful experiences of job relocation: huge expense and considerable upheaval of services. As other Members said, the Scottish Executive have had virtually to reverse their decentralisation policy and give increased weight to value for money.

The last thing that the Assembly should be doing is wasting taxpayers' money or heaping any more pressure on our already creaking public services. We must ensure that any changes are carefully thought out and bring short-term financial rewards.

Mr Gallagher: This is the second time that the location of public sector jobs has been debated in the Chamber. After the Bain report was first published a couple of years ago, I proposed a motion on the location of public sector jobs. I am delighted that there is an opportunity to remind the Executive of the importance of taking the initiative forward. The previous SDLP motion was inspired by our desire to see equal opportunity and fair treatment for people everywhere in Northern Ireland.

I do not want to go over history, but the clear evidence of the economic neglect of the west has not been properly identified. Everyone would agree that economic neglect leads to a lack of economic opportunity, which can cause social deprivation and other problems. We all have a responsibility to address those problems.

I agreed with David McNarry when he talked about the mood and atmosphere in the Chamber. The topic that we are discussing is crucial to people everywhere, who want to see the Executive deliver. The number of empty seats in the Chamber is a statement in itself.

I did not agree with David McNarry and other Members who asked where the money will come from for the decentralisation of public sector jobs. The failure to tackle social deprivation and all the resultant issues, and their effect on our society, means that we simply cannot afford to do nothing. As Members know, six towns were identified in the Bain report, and I welcome its recommendations for those towns. However, three other towns — Cookstown, Downpatrick and Enniskillen — were mentioned in the Bain report as having the potential to share in the relocation of public sector jobs; they should not be forgotten.

Those places had problems with infrastructure, which Bain recommended should be tackled first. The infrastructure in those three towns, spread out as they are, should be addressed. The infrastructure was said to be weak, and I forget the exact wording that was used about Enniskillen, which is in my constituency. It is the most westerly town that is identified and should not be set aside or allowed to fall out of the Bain recommendations.

4.45 pm

Various Departments have responsibilities for Enniskillen. The roads infrastructure must be improved because there is no railway system. It seems that the small airport there will never be developed because no investment has been provided. Therefore, it is important that the Executive not only take on board the importance of implementing proposals in the six towns that are mentioned in Bain but take responsibility to tackle the infrastructural shortcomings in the other three towns, for which investment will be required.

I mentioned the importance of investment in roads in the west. However, the Department of Finance and

Personnel is currently consulting on a massive cut to the roads budget. It is not good enough that people in the west are not included in the recommendations of the Bain report, and it will certainly not be good enough if the Executive fail to provide the investment to improve the infrastructure, as was highlighted in the report and on many previous occasions. The Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department for Regional Development have responsibilities.

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

Mr Gallagher: All our government bodies and the Executive face challenges. They should be taken seriously, and we need some action to address the shortcomings.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion, which is important at this time. We have been told that the cost of around £40 million is causing problems. We must consider how the business case is put together and on what it is based. What questions do we need to ask to get an answer?

Professor Bain issued an explicit health warning and explained the limitations of the indicative costs modelling that was undertaken as part of the review. He pointed out that significant political will is required to implement relocation because of the acute cost benefits that were forecast. Moreover, he considered the issues around long-term social and economic benefits, which must be factored in and will form an important part of the consideration of relocation. Cost is not the only issue. The current structure works within certain parameters, which may need to be reviewed and changed as we progress.

People in public sector jobs have been surveyed. Stephen Farry said that people in those jobs do not want to move. However, other people want to move into such jobs but cannot do so because they are not available in their area. They do not want to travel on the M1 or M2 every morning to work in Belfast. They want to work in local towns and villages. Relocation to rural areas is an important part of that process and will ensure that those people have the opportunity to take up some of those jobs.

It does not make sense that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is based in Dundonald House in east Belfast. It could be relocated to the Loughry campus of CAFRE, where there are many empty buildings and many acres of ground to build on. Moreover, a section of the Forest Service could be relocated. People from Enniskillen travel to Dundonald House to make decisions about forestry around the country.

Mrs D Kelly: I support the Member on that issue. In whose gift is it to make the decision to relocate

those jobs? Can the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development make that decision, or would she have to rely on money from the Minister of Finance and Personnel?

Mr Molloy: I will repeat what my colleague Martina Anderson said; it is an Executive decision. The Minister has said in the past that she would be interested in relocating jobs if the Executive made the decision and provided the necessary resources. During and after her pregnancy, she worked from an office at Loughry, so she was able to decentralise in that way. Parts of Departments could be relocated, creating new employment and new opportunities, instead of being based in expensive rented Belfast city centre offices that are owned by developers and Departments alike.

Look at what happens on the M1 every morning and every evening to people who commute in and out of Belfast. We should look at other opportunities. Members ask where the savings would be made. Why not wind up a lot of the quangos and bring their functions under direct ministerial control where they would be more accountable? Services such as roads and water have been centralised, and health is being centralised in the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast while local areas are losing out on hospitals. We must look at that situation.

Discrimination west of the Bann was a very blunt instrument that affected everyone. I heard George Robinson say that his constituency could do with jobs being relocated there. Everyone west of the Bann was discriminated against because they were denied services, infrastructure, businesses and industry. All those issues must be rectified if the Assembly is going to deliver anything for the people. Let us bring the quangos back under the control of Departments, promote the idea that we are interested in preserving our social fabric, and deal with the community cost of providing jobs in places to which people do not have to travel long distances every morning. We must deal with the perception that discrimination still exists west of the Bann.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I welcome the thrust of the motion and the debate, although, given the wording of the motion, there are issues to which I take exception. I know that, having spoken privately to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, he is very excited and very positively disposed towards the issues.

People would be mad not to recognise that, as constituency representatives, we want as many good opportunities as possible to flow to our areas. The motion allows for a genuine and detailed debate on that issue. The debate is not and should not be seen as a whinging session during which Members make demands for their constituencies and ignore everyone else. There is merit in the motion and the debate.

We should remember that the Bain review was commissioned by the then Minister of Finance and Personnel, now the First Minister, Peter Robinson, who encouraged out-of-the-box thinking whereby people would be tasked to examine opportunities to develop the location of public sector jobs outside the main cities of our Province. Those of us who represent largely rural constituencies see great vitality and opportunity for such projects to go forward.

However, we would be kidding ourselves if we were not alive to the economic climate in which the new Minister of Finance and Personnel finds himself. That economic climate has, to a degree, unfortunately curtailed the ambition of the Bain proposals, largely because the money is not there to relocate many of those posts; neither is there the opportunity, given that public sector jobs will be put under significant pressure over the next year. If there is a new Government at Westminster, that pressure will be greater than people here have given proper thought to. Therefore, we have to recognise the tightening-of-the-belt situation that we are in.

However, opportunities still exist that should not be lost. It has been proposed that opportunities be developed in Ballymena, which is in my constituency. I would like to see that happen. Ballymena acts as a hub for Coleraine at one end of the constituency and as an employment hub for Larne and Carrickfergus at the other. The areas that were identified in the Bain report should be considered whenever an opportunity for such hubs to be built arises or for public sector jobs to be located or created.

The previous Member to speak, Mr Molloy, who is a Member for Mid Ulster, made valid points about DARD. Most people from the rural community who have to interface with DARD would like to see people in that Department employed in the rural community and in parts of Northern Ireland that are much more accessible than east Belfast. That does not do violence to anyone's current position or to the standing of the Department. Dundonald House is a building that is, quite frankly, not fit for purpose, and if the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development found that she wanted to close it, or if the Executive wanted to remodel or rebuild it, there would be considerable merit in locating what is one of the largest Departments to an area that is easier to access by those who use it most, namely, the rural community and farming sector. Therefore, various opportunities exist.

Opportunities also exist through the creation of, for example, the new Charity Commission and the Commission for Victims and Survivors. Those bodies provide opportunities for people in public sector employment to be relocated or newly located. I hope that those issues are not lost on the Minister or the Department when they look at the motion, and I hope

that they see it as promoting a concept that could, under better economic circumstances, be given a fair wind and some encouragement.

Mr Savage: I welcome the debate, and I congratulate the Members for securing it. Given that I will talk about the Craigavon Borough Council area, I declare an interest as a member of that council.

The decentralisation of public sector jobs has a role to play in securing the economic stability of our Province. Understandably, Belfast is the central location for public sector jobs. However, that means that many people have to travel far and wide to maintain their employment. There is no real call for that.

I accept the assertion in the motion that the implementation of the Bain report would, in some shape or form, have significant social, regional and economic benefits now and in the future. Take, for example, Craigavon, which is in the centre of my Upper Bann constituency. As many people know, Craigavon was planned as a large urban and suburban conurbation that was designed to encourage people to move away from Belfast, ensuring a more even distribution of development. Many people also know that difficulties ensued, with the major employers in the area, such as Goodyear, failing to make regular profits. Those companies had to close, making many in the area redundant. That situation was compounded by the Troubles, which served only to stunt Craigavon's growth.

Craigavon still remains, and it is an important area that is thriving. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency classifies Craigavon as a large town, and the 2001 census showed that there were 81,000 people in the area. With a census due next year, I would suggest that there are many more than 90,000 people in Craigavon. Lurgan and Portadown are the main towns in the Craigavon urban area, and the area now extends to Banbridge and Lisburn on one side and to Dungannon on the other. Bearing that in mind, I contend that the Craigavon area is ripe for an influx of public sector jobs. That said, however, I can hope, wish and lobby for jobs to come to the Craigavon area.

The reality is that it will not happen in the current financial climate. With the public purse pinched like never before, it is abundantly clear that the finances and other necessary instruments are not there to allow the Bain report to progress to the implementation stage. We must ensure value for money at all times, and that does not currently seem to be apparent. I hope that the situation will change.

5.00 pm

I am unable to support the motion but call on the Executive to maintain a watching brief on the matter. The Craigavon area is ripe for growth. We can only hope that the Executive can distribute those jobs in a

more even fashion, which would help stimulate what we intended to do in Craigavon a number of years ago.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. There appears to be a fairly normal divide on this issue, which is to be expected: people are picking their spots. I support the motion.

Rural constituencies sometimes suffer a double whammy of decentralisation in the wrong direction. We see jobs going to Belfast and Omagh, for example, because some people cannot look further than the border of Fermanagh and see it as land's end from a Northern point of view. There is duplication of many jobs, from Carrick-on-Shannon back to Enniskillen and Omagh. The loss of revenue and the cost of that has not been looked at on a cross-border basis, and that is also part of the debate.

During the debate, many Members, some of whom support the motion, have explained the cost of implementing the review and said that that is the reason why we cannot look at this now. It is more about mindsets than about whether it can be done. This is at least the second time that we have debated the subject.

I know about Rathgael House. Stephen Farry said that people from the greater Belfast area are defending their positions in the sometimes cosseted comfort zone of Belfast. When they look to the outback, which to them is anywhere beyond the M1, there is the belief that they would need a work visa to go to somewhere like Fermanagh. That is where we are with the Civil Service, and it leaves us in a difficult situation that is made more difficult through the new phenomenon of equality of service, let alone equality of jobs.

We have to deal with call centres that offer the option of pressing 1, 2, 3, or 4 to answer a call. One cannot deal with actual people unless one gets in the car and drives to Belfast. People in Belfast can go directly to those offices and meet people to discuss issues; we do not have that benefit. Anyone in rural areas will find that those services are not as good as they have been, and that they cannot talk to a real person in order to resolve various issues.

The issue of equality of jobs is a big one, and there is no balance. If someone were to be promoted in Fermanagh, in agriculture for example, a person offered a grade three position must take it up in Belfast. If they do not, they will never see that promotion go beyond the paper stage in their working life. If they want to live in Fermanagh, they will never be promoted beyond grade two. There is dislocation from areas.

Some Members have agreed that the concept should be agreeable to everyone. It is ironic that this same debate has taken place in the Dáil, and the cross-party divide on the issue is exactly the same as in this place. Only one of every two MLAs represents a rural area. We are outnumbered, and we will always lose the

debate, however long it goes on. It is about propping up Belfast or Dublin. All the buildings occupied by the Civil Service will be kept, because it feels comfortable. Similarly, the six major hospitals are in and around Belfast. Members from cities such as Derry have argued in favour of the motion. It is ironic that people who should agree are arguing the same points but only from their own positions.

People from rural areas will always have difficulty getting through to those in ivory towers. People in the Civil Service have built up their ivory towers over long periods of time. Agriculture and education have been mentioned in the debate. Indeed, it was too much to ask even for the Department of Education to move its headquarters from Rathgael House in Bangor to Belfast city centre.

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

Mr McHugh: I hope that progress will be made over time, because cost is not the only issue.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member for North Antrim Mr Paisley Jnr, who has now left the Chamber, started his speech by saying that I was excited by the prospect of the debate. I must say that I am neither excited nor not excited, but, given the attendance, it seems quite clear that the House is not excited by the debate. Of course, we all know why that is the case.

The Member for Strangford made the point that some of the Members who have talked most vociferously about the importance of addressing this issue are far more interested in grandstanding and creating instability in Northern Ireland through their tactics in the discussions on the devolution of policing and justice. I do not think that the Northern Ireland population is overly excited about that issue either, yet it seems to have become an obsession for some Members, to the extent that it may well put what we have here at considerable risk.

Members have asked me to be straightforward and honest and to give clear answers. The proposer of the motion was one of those who made that request, but, as he well knows, I never do anything else. I will look at some of the issues that have been raised and address them in a straightforward way.

Many Members, mostly those on the other side of the House, expressed the view that economic benefits need to be spread across Northern Ireland. Neither I nor the Executive disagree with that. However, the impression has been given here today that the Bain report's modest proposals for the relocation, not creation, of some 3,000 jobs will somehow dramatically change the distribution of economic activity in Northern Ireland. If the Members who put forward that argument thought about it, they would realise just how shallow and paper-thin it is.

The main driver for the spread of economic benefit is the massive programme of investment — £1.7 billion of capital investment, for example — that is undertaken every year as a result of Executive decisions. Consider, for example, the amount of money that DRD is spending to improve infrastructure in the north-west. Over the next 10 years, £800 million will be invested in infrastructure to the benefit of the north-west. That kind of investment is likely to draw even more investment from the private sector and elsewhere. If we want to deal with the problem of economic inequality across Northern Ireland, perhaps we should focus attention on that rather than on the Bain report.

It struck me as odd that Members call for more public sector jobs to be relocated to rather than created in their areas. I do not know whether they have ever listened to anything that I have said in this House or whether they ever read the newspapers, but the jobs that will be under threat in the forthcoming years are the very ones that they are asking to have relocated to their areas. For the next 10 years in the United Kingdom, we will face economic pressures that will be directed increasingly towards the public sector as we try to reduce its debt and borrowing. If ever there were a loser to be backed, it is investing in public sector jobs in the areas about which Members have spoken.

There have been some very odd allies in this debate, particularly Mr McNarry and Mr Farry. I begin to get worried when I find that I am lined up with those people. Mr Farry made a very important point: if we have £40 million to spend, we ought to spend it on jobs that will create wealth and have spin-off effects, not on the area of the economy that is relocating.

Mr Molloy and members of the SDLP made great play of the commitment of their parties to spreading economic benefits across Northern Ireland. I will talk about their Ministers in a minute or two, but what do their parties do? Do we find that, in the interest of spreading economic benefits, they locate their party headquarters in Londonderry, Enniskillen or Omagh? Not at all. The SDLP's party headquarters is in rich south Belfast. It is right in the city centre, presumably because that is handy. Sinn Féin's party headquarters is in west Belfast. It is significant that, even though this is an SDLP motion that is supported by Sinn Féin, those parties have kept their Belfast representatives and their greater Belfast representatives strangely silent. It is because they know that there is an inconsistency in the approach. Their parties make decisions in certain ways that are reflected in where they locate their headquarters and, therefore, in the staff who are associated with those headquarters.

Mr Molloy and other Sinn Féin Members talked about their party's commitment to spreading economic benefits, yet he mentioned the Department of

Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). Mr Beggs from East Antrim pointed out that, when the Agriculture Minister looked for efficiencies, she centralised DARD jobs. My constituency and the town of Larne lost jobs because of DARD's centralisation. Dundonald House was mentioned. If the Minister wishes to relocate those jobs, it is up to her to bring forward proposals and to present a business case. As far as I am aware, no such business case has been made. No such decision has been made because she knows that she has to live within a certain budget and, to do that, there are certain realities that she has to face.

A row has been going on around the countryside because the Social Development Minister has looked at benefit offices and decided to relocate jobs. Indeed, the decentralising Minister from that decentralising party has moved those jobs from Larne to Corporation Street in Belfast. The parties opposite say that they are all for decentralisation, but, when it comes down to the nitty-gritty of making the economic decisions, their stance is no different to the stance that I have adopted.

5.15 pm

Secondly, we are told that there are vast economic benefits. I am glad that some Members have said that they welcome my important proposals for an invest to save fund that will enable us to save money in the future. However, to think that the invest to save proposals are applicable to the relocation of public sector jobs indicates that the Members who talk about the fund either do not understand what it is for or have not read Bain. Investing to save means that we spend money now in order to make savings in the future. Bain said the following about the relocation of jobs:

“Accurate cost benefit and value-for-money assessments will be difficult”,

if not impossible, to prove. Therefore, when it comes to an invest to save proposal, Professor Bain has said that it would be impossible to generate those figures. In fact, he indicated that:

“relocations require up-front investment and are unlikely to produce financial benefits in the short term.”

When I announced invest to save, Members asked me what my criteria would be. The aim was to ensure that savings were maximised and made as quickly as possible. So, even on the basis of the report that Members want to debate in the House today, applying invest to save proposals is very unlikely.

Members on this side of the House have pointed out that no Member has indicated how to find the money to be spent on relocating jobs. The closest we got to it was Mr Gallagher. He did not identify where the money might come from, but his answer was — I am growing sick and tired of these kind of answers in the House — that we simply cannot afford not to do something. What kind of an answer is that? It is all

about a challenge, and the challenge is this: if he wants to spend £40 million, tell us where it will be taken from. That is the harsh reality.

I do not want to prattle on about opportunity costs, because I mention it nearly every time I speak in the House. However, it seems that Members still wilfully ignore the fact that money cannot be spent on one thing without taking it off something else. Choices must be made. That is not a value-for-money consideration. That is why Professor Bain couched it in terms of there having to be a political will. In other words, one must look beyond the economics to a political decision.

At this time of tight constraints on finance, we do not have the money to meet all the demands being made by Ministers and Members and to be made when we debate the Budget in a month's time, if we ever get that far. Are Members seriously telling me to ignore value-for-money considerations and throw aside the Government green book on public spending in favour of spending on this because it is good for us to have a debate and to tell our constituents that we are fighting to get public sector jobs relocated to their town? That is what is being asked.

Other jurisdictions that started with the high ideals of wanting to relocate public sector jobs have, in the face of the hard economic reality that they have encountered in public finances, shelved their projects or gone back to value-for-money considerations. Indeed, when the matter was last debated, the Assembly's wish was that the decision should be based on value-for-money considerations.

Some Members asked about some of the other things that the Executive are spending money on, including RPA. There are up-front costs associated with RPA, but there are also quantifiable benefits, which are well in excess of the costs. I accept that many of the Executive's past decisions probably did not produce value for money, and I will not try to defend them on that basis. With hindsight, perhaps we should not have made those decisions, but, in the current economic circumstances, does that mean that we should go on making wrong decisions?

The next argument was for the environmental benefits; people will travel less. The truth of the matter is — even Professor Bain pointed this out — only 264 people travel every day from Londonderry. If we relocated an office to Londonderry, is it likely that all those 264 people would be employed in it? The answer is no, because their skills and qualifications, the Department in which they work and their ability to move from one job to another would not allow 100% of them to move to whatever office may be located in Londonderry. Indeed, you would probably find that just as many people who currently live in Belfast would simply travel to Londonderry. I must inform Members

that burning petrol coming from Londonderry to Belfast produces the same carbon footprint — something with which everyone in the House knows I am well acquainted — as coming from Belfast to Londonderry, so there would be no environmental advantage. Likewise, sitting in a line of traffic in one direction is the same as sitting in congestion in the other. Let us not presume, therefore, that there would be environmental benefits.

The next point that was made was that it is an Executive decision. I am not passing the buck: at the end of the day, it is an Executive decision, and it will not be made by me as the Finance Minister. I just happen to have stuck my neck out and given my view on the matter, but do not forget that the Members who protested that it is an Executive decision all have Ministers from their parties in the Executive. Within a couple of months of the matter first being debated in the Assembly, Nigel Dodds took a report to the Executive. In October 2009, I again took a report to the Executive. Neither of those reports has been acted on, so maybe the Members who said that it is an Executive decision should ask their respective Executive Ministers why they have not acted on the reports from two DUP Finance Ministers, one of whom is a sceptic. I suspect that it is because they know that the underlying economic reality would present difficulties. Why have Executive Ministers whose parties we are told are so tied to the principle not brought forward proposals for decentralisation? Indeed, as I said, some of those Members' proposals would actually entail centralisation.

Many people will recognise that there is a myth around this subject. I listened to Mr McHugh, who spoke about a mindset of protecting Belfast. If he had taken the time to read the Bain report, he would have found that 60% of public sector jobs are located in the greater Belfast area. That is not totally out of sync with the proportion of the Northern Ireland population in the greater Belfast area, which is 52%. Therefore, the idea that there is massive skewing is wrong.

There were allegations that the west of the Province is badly done by, but, if one looks at the distribution of public sector jobs per 100 of the working population, the highest proportion is not in Belfast; it is in Omagh. The last time that I looked at a map, Omagh was west of the Bann. Furthermore, Londonderry has the third-highest proportion, at 17.2%, and, as far as I know, Londonderry is located in the west of Northern Ireland. Therefore, of the top three locations, two are located west of the Bann.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please draw your remarks to a close, Minister.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I believe that this debate will go on. I have sought honestly today to look at the arguments that have been made,

but I believe that many of them are shallow. Therefore, I ask Members to reject the motion.

Mr O'Loan: Two lines of poetry by Wilfred Owen have kept recurring to me all afternoon:

"O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?"

Those words were written amid the carnage and mayhem of the First World War, and it is almost sacrilegious to quote them in relation to the more minor mayhem that is going on around us. Nonetheless, they kept recurring to me because they seemed appropriate. As some of us try to do something workmanlike inside the Chamber, there are others outside it who, without good reason, are quite prepared to pull down the structures by which we are governed. I even find elements of mayhem around the motion and the issues that it addresses. What is the point of commissioning, at considerable expense, a 200-page report on an issue and then, as one Member put it, binning it? I do not think that that indicates a strategic direction on the part of the Assembly.

David McNarry talked about the Assembly doing real things. I tried to intervene, but he would not take an intervention. Nevertheless, I wanted to ask him whether he rejects the issue of parades and the Parades Commission being brought into a discussion of how we are governed here. Does he reject that absolutely and say that we should concentrate on the things that are actually of some importance?

I welcome the wholehearted support from some Members and the more guarded support from others. Throughout my contribution, I may omit many comments that Members made, but I will try to do justice to most of them, because valuable comments were made. I thank Mitchel McLaughlin, Martina Anderson, George Robinson to some degree, Ian Paisley Jnr, Gerry McHugh and others who supported the motion. At one point, I was going to include George Savage in that list, but he and Roy Beggs seemed to be saying that the delivery of the Bain report is absolutely essential but then saying that it cannot and should not be done. That is not an example of great political leadership.

The chairman's foreword to the report states:

"We were established in December 2007 as an independent review to put forward 'an agenda for action' and 'a set of practical recommendations for the longer-term approach to the location of public sector jobs'."

They were given the instruction to put forward an agenda for action, and it was the former Minister of Finance, Peter Robinson, who issued that instruction. I still think that Peter Robinson is committed to the issue. I note an answer that he gave to my colleague Pat Ramsey on 21 January 2008:

"There are real advantages for Northern Ireland if we can have a fair distribution of jobs around the Province, with reduced pressure on our infrastructure if jobs are close to people rather than bringing people along our roads to jobs. If we can grow the economy, particularly in the areas that we are pressing for — financial services, business services, and computer technology — those jobs are more likely to come to the greater Belfast area. Therefore, it becomes all the more important that we look at the jobs where we have a greater control of location and consider their displacement to other areas of the Province."

I thank Peter Robinson for his support.

5.30 pm

I could quote at length the report's actual contents and recommendations, which are not given enough consideration. Often, quite a few of its early recommendations are not even discussed, such as flexible working; a network of regional satellite offices; an information and communications technology strategy for flexible working; a network of touchdown office space on the Stormont estate for flexible use by officials; policies on remote working and homeworking as a matter of urgency; and wider use of telephone, video and web conferencing. Those are not grand, dramatic proposals, which the report has avoided. It suggests phasing them in over a five-year period.

Members are aware that six hub towns were identified, with the possibility of three others being added in the longer term. The report proposes that there should be a presumption against locating in Belfast when establishing new public sector bodies. It states that new bodies should be candidates for relocation, which should be considered with regard to operational/processing units, common services organisations and cross-border bodies. Another recommendation is that relocation should be considered in the event of restructuring of Departments, lease breaks and where opportunities exist to enhance service delivery. I commented on the Minister's remarks because he was unfair to those proposals, as though they would involve dramatic dislocation of existing job positioning.

The report is specific in its proposal to use opportunities. It names 13 bodies that are either new or significantly restructured, where considerable change is necessary and inevitable. The Minister was not fair to that proposal from the Bain committee at all. The report also proposes how that will be delivered by the Executive and a secretariat, none of which, sadly, has been introduced by the Minister.

The issue of cost was dwelt on at some length. Peter Weir told us that affordability is the fatal flaw. Roy Beggs supported that position. Perhaps the figure of £40 million is in the report somewhere. However, I read quite a bit of the financial information yet struggled to find it. If one reads the contents of the text and the appendices, it is clear that the matter is much more complex. The cost is variable and depends, according to the report, on many assumptions. It is

uncertain and depends on which particular project is being taken forward. It certainly cannot be pitched simply by creating a worst-case-scenario figure of £40 million and then saying that it is not doable. That is not constructive and is unlike the Minister, who is capable of original thinking and is willing to get on with tackling problems. I am disappointed that he continues to take the approach that he is taking.

Stephen Farry told the House that if particular cases were analysed, opportunities sought, and cost-benefit analyses carried out, they would all fail the green book. That depends on what values they have, on which I will comment further, and to what degree and how the benefits that have been discussed are costed, which may or may not be capable of financial realisation.

We are, of course, living in difficult financial times. However, rather than say that we cannot touch the £40 million, and thereby do nothing, I suggest that it is the Minister's job to sort that out. To dump the problem on the Executive, as he did, and to tell other Ministers to bring him their proposals is not what the Assembly expects from the lead Minister. It expects that Minister to produce the beginnings of proposals.

The Bain committee's overall proposal is modest. Nonetheless, he wants it to be delivered strategically. Although I accept that it is more difficult to do that strategically if it is done piecemeal, it is much better than doing nothing.

I want to mention the collapse of Workplace 2010. There is a huge need to upgrade the Civil Service estate. That is an opportunity to be used. It must be remembered that modern office buildings are much cheaper to run. That argument has been made for investment in buildings. I praise the Minister for his openness to the invest to save concept. I would like to think that he is listening to me. Why does he not apply his invest to save thinking to that issue? The simple fact that office rentals are much cheaper outside of Belfast must also be remembered. The report provides evidence of that.

Last week, I attended a conference on spatial planning and economic development. Of course, that particular discussion is part of a wider debate on spatial planning. Bain considered the regional development strategy when he was devising his proposals. If our regional development strategy is to go anywhere, the spatial planning element needs to be thought of in the context of the whole island.

I want to make an important point relating to Stephen Farry's concerns about distributing the cake versus baking more cakes and his remarkable comment about public sector jobs being a poor substitute for private sector jobs. I do not think that that is a proper analysis of the value to society of public sector jobs vis-à-vis private sector jobs. It is not a competition in

that sense. However, it raises the point that all spatial planning has a value base.

I am told that Scotland has embraced a culture of spatial planning more strongly than we have done. It has been embraced by the political elite there to the extent that spatial planning sits within the Department of Finance and Sustainable Growth. We need to decide where we want to go. We must not be put off by the first obstacle. The current financial obstacle before us is major, but we need to decide where we want to go, what our values are and what our political decision is.

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: I am not permitted more time, and I have only a few seconds left. Therefore, with respect, Mr Campbell, I cannot give way.

I want to repeat an analogy that was used: use a garryowen, and do not forever stay stuck in the scrum.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 32; Noes 39.

AYES

Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr Gallagher, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Leonard, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr McHugh, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr D Bradley and Mr Burns.

NOES

Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Hamilton, Mr Irwin, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr B Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr G Robinson and Mr Shannon.

Question accordingly negatived.

Adjourned at 5.49pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 26 January 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I inform Members that the Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Bill has received Royal Assent. The Goods Vehicles (Licensing of Operators) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 became law on 22 January 2010.

Diseases of Animals Bill

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I inform Members that the Diseases of Animals Bill has received Royal Assent. The Diseases of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 became law on 22 January 2010.

PUBLIC PETITION

Special Educational Needs and Inclusion

Mr Speaker: Mr Dominic Bradley has begged leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom achainí a bhronnadh ort le tabhairt don Aire Oideachais. Beidh an achainí ag cur in éadan na moltaí atá sa doiciméad comhairliúcháin ‘An Bealach Chun Tosaigh le haghaidh Riachtanais Speisialta Oideachais’.

Mr Speaker, I wish, through you, to present a petition to the Minister of Education opposing the proposals contained in the consultation document ‘Every School a Good School: The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion’. There are over 4,000 names on the petition, which I present on behalf of parents and carers of children with autism, and the Newry and Mourne Down’s Syndrome Parent Support Group. The main points of objection centre on early expert diagnosis and intervention, the retention of statutory rights of parents and children, and the ring-fencing of funding for special educational needs.

Mr D Bradley moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister of Education and a copy to the Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

Second Stage

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA 6/09) be agreed.

The Bill contains four measures. First, it introduces powers to enable my Department to introduce a permit scheme, which is aimed at minimising the disruption on the roads that is caused by certain works. My Department introduced the Street Works (Amendment) Order 2007, which contains similar proposals for a permit scheme. However, that was confined to street works, which are largely the work of utility companies. Utility companies operating in the North lobbied for a level playing field by seeking to ensure that any permit scheme that is introduced here will cover all those who carry out works on roads. Consequently, the permit scheme provisions will apply not only to the works of utility companies but to the works for road purposes that are carried out by my Department, as the road authority.

The facility to apply the arrangements to other works on the roads is also provided for. The earlier street works arrangements, which have not yet been exercised, will be repealed by the Bill. Members will note that no permit scheme regulations may be made without being laid before and approved by the Assembly.

The second measure will give local councils the power to temporarily restrict traffic or to close roads for sporting, social or entertainment events. The background to that is that it is not clear to whom a promoter should apply in cases where an event is to be held. The Department was lobbied by a number of organisations, including the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and NI Screen. The PSNI uses powers that are available to it to facilitate events such as the Belfast marathon. However, the PSNI has concerns about whether those powers are appropriate. Additionally, there are no legislative powers here that enable location filming to take place on roads. The Bill will clarify the position with regard to the appropriate authority. Councils will authorise events on all roads in their areas, except special roads, usually motorways, for which my Department will have responsibility.

The third measure will ensure that the Road Traffic Regulation Order 1997 is fully human rights compliant by introducing an amendment to that Order to enable my Department to hold an inquiry into the execution of

any of its functions under the Order. That is required because some articles of the 1997 Order include powers to hold an inquiry while others provide a right of appeal or a right to make representations to the Department in respect of decisions already made. However, some articles do not provide any such safeguards to the public. The Bill will rectify that.

Finally, the Bill will amend the duties of the Lord Chancellor that are outlined in the Traffic Management Order 2005. The Constitutional Reform Act 2005 reformed the office of Lord Chancellor to give legal effect to the separation of the Lord Chancellor's judicial and executive functions. The Lord Chief Justice for the North became the head of the judiciary here, and, as a result, many of the Lord Chancellor's judiciary and court-related functions transferred to him. The Bill takes account of the changes between the offices of the Lord Chancellor and the Lord Chief Justice and amends the 2005 Order accordingly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Second Stage of the Bill. The Committee is mindful of the need to progress business in an efficient and effective manner while discharging its scrutiny responsibilities on behalf of the Assembly in a thorough and conscientious way. The Committee is taking that approach to the Bill.

At its meeting on 20 January 2009, the Committee for Regional Development agreed that it intended not to oppose the principles of the Bill. The Committee welcomes the proposal to extend the permit scheme to include other works on roads, and it welcomes the fact that the scheme is not limited to utility companies. During the consultation, the utility companies raised their concern that the scheme should not be limited in that way. The Committee will investigate that further during Committee Stage. In their responses to the consultation, the utility companies were not in favour of a permit scheme, but they felt that if such a scheme were in place, it should apply to all works. When it considers the proposals on the permit scheme, the Committee will pay particular attention to the cost implications.

The Committee welcomed the fact that the Department took account of the consultation responses and decided to transfer the management of road closures on trunk roads to councils. That is to be welcomed not only on account of the fact that the views of consultees have obviously influenced the process but on account of the fact that such closures can now be considered and acted upon in a more timely manner. If the function were to be retained in the Department, proposals to close roads would have to proceed through the introduction of subordinate legislation, which can be a long, drawn-out process. Transferring the functions to the councils will remove the need for subordinate legislation.

The Committee welcomes the proposals to allow inquiries into the decision-making process of the Department to take place, and will consider those further during its evidence-gathering process. As this stage, the Committee welcomes the potential enhancement for the protection of human rights contained in the proposal.

We look forward to Committee Stage. I assure the Minister that the Bill will be a priority for the Committee.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Miss McIlveen): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Second Stage of the Bill. I welcome the principles of the Bill, which have been outlined by the Minister and the Chairman.

We can all agree that confusion exists around some matters relating to road closures, particularly for special events in and around our constituencies. I am going to be parochial for just a second; it is an occupational hazard. Strangford has two main events: the Fayre in the Square in Comber and the Portaferry Gala. The former requires the closure of the square. Until recently, there was a great deal of toing and froing between agencies to determine who was responsible for the closure of the square, which caused a great deal of anxiety for the organisers of such events. The Bill appears to simplify and clarify that process, which is to be welcomed.

We all recognise the importance of community-led and community-based activities in our local areas. As well as funding issues, the level of bureaucracy that is required to organise such events often deters people from getting involved. The responsibility for the management of such closures presently lies with the Department. The Bill proposes that powers to close roads for special events would rest with local councils, which is consistent with the recommendations made under the review of public administration (RPA).

As has been said, the Bill proposes to introduce measures to amend current permit legislation. It is intended to introduce a new permit scheme that will create better controls on the timing and duration of the works on the roads. Such a scheme will ensure that transport delays and travellers' inconvenience as a result of works that are being carried out on roads are kept to a minimum. Clearly, when road usage is increasing and there is a continued reliance on roads, it is necessary for a workable and an effective permit scheme to be put in place. I particularly welcome the fact that the proposed scheme will extend beyond the utility companies and will include other works on the roads.

The Bill also proposes to allow for inquiries to be held into the exercise by the Department of any of its functions under the Road Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, thereby allowing for oversight and accountability of such processes. That is to be welcomed, and I look forward to examining it in greater detail during

Committee Stage. It is also to be welcomed that such a power will enhance the rights of individuals and companies that are affected by the Department's decisions.

Finally, the Bill seeks to amend the Traffic Management (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 to take account of the reform of the office of the Lord Chancellor. I have no particular issues about that.

At this stage, and in principle, I support the Bill, and I look forward to considering it in greater detail at Committee Stage.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas don Aire as an seans a thabhairt dúinn labhairt ar an Bhille seo.

The Chairperson outlined the Committee's views — there was no opposition to the principles of the Bill. As he and the Minister said, there are four main aspects to the Bill, including road closures for special events. The Committee discussed that issue and some of the difficulties that organisers of special events have had, such as who is responsible for road closures. The Bill will clear up such difficulties. It is a similar situation with the permit schemes.

The Bill also introduces a power to hold inquiries, and it makes appropriate amendments to the Road Traffic Regulation Order 1997, as outlined by the Minister, regarding changes to the functions of the Lord Chief Justice in the North.

The intention of the Bill is to update the legislation and to provide for more efficient and better management of certain issues. In that sense, we support the proposals. Issues were brought to the Committee's attention through the consultation process, and it is our intention to examine those at the appropriate stage and to report back. However, we support the Bill.

10.45 am

Mr Gallagher: I understand that proposals for the Bill first came before the Committee for Regional Development in September 2008. I was appointed to the Committee after that time.

At this stage, the SDLP has no particular difficulty with the Bill's provisions, the two main components of which are the permit schemes and road closures. We look forward to further detail and clarification of those issues at Committee Stage.

I note that the Committee Chairman said that the utility companies have indicated that if there is to be a permit system, it should apply to all works. I presume that the utility companies mean that anyone who has to carry out any roadworks should have to pay a charge to obtain a permit. The charging for permits needs to be considered in more detail. Is the purpose of a permit scheme simply to generate some income for the Department, or is there something more to it? In Committee, we will want to

examine the fairness of such a system and to ensure that no undue burden is placed on those who might carry out roadworks on a one-off basis, such as members of the farming community or people who are building a new home in the countryside. That kind of work can often entail building a house on one side of the road and a septic tank on the other. We will seek further clarification on that kind of issue at Committee Stage.

There are merits in transferring powers to local councils to allow them to close roads in order to facilitate local festivals and other events, such as sporting events. As I said earlier, we will seek more detail on that at Committee Stage.

Mr Kinahan: I, too, welcome the chance to speak to the Bill. It has caused us to focus on the management of the digging-up of roads and on how we pass that responsibility to local councils in future.

I congratulate Roads Service on many areas of its work, especially over the winter period. Staff have put in long hours and a great deal of work into everything that they have done.

I shall concentrate on one or two little points that should be raised. In the Bill, we see passed down to councils a tiny morsel of what my colleague Sam Foster had envisaged for the review of public administration. It is pathetic. A few more powers, concerning on-street and off-street parking, are to be delegated to councils, but we have not properly considered what we should pass to councils. The RPA lets us down in that respect.

The councils welcome those powers and any accompanying resources. However, I have two areas of concern. One is over the need to ensure that when they use permits to close roads, councils talk to one another, whether through Roads Service or directly. That is so that we do not witness a large pop concert in one council area being hindered by closed roads in an adjacent area. We need a dynamic system to ensure that councils and Roads Service talk to one another.

My other concern relates to a point that the Public Accounts Committee raised last year about the Northern Ireland street-works register and notification system (NISRANS). It was pointed out that the system does not work properly, largely as a result of late notifications, some of which are given by Northern Ireland Water. In the Bill, we give more power to one facet of the Department for Regional Development (DRD) — namely, Roads Service — yet the present system does not work at times. The Department needs to look at that system and get it to work much more effectively.

Most Members, wherever they live, see roads being dug up. Where I live, in Templepatrick, one of the main roads to Belfast International Airport is being dug up endlessly by electricity or gas companies or to install traffic lights. Now driving on it is like driving on a country road. With all due respect to Fermanagh,

that road could be a back road in the middle of the countryside.

When I was at school, I learned that the Romans built good roads, with their systems running alongside them. Today, we have many more roads, and many, many more systems, which must run under, over or beside the roads. We must manage our roads in a slicker way than we do at present.

I sometimes wonder whether computers and desk-based studies have taken away from the experience of people who carried out practical work on the ground and knew what mattered. Therefore, we should consider whether we are cutting the right jobs. My party supports the Bill, and I look forward to discussing it at Committee Stage.

The Minister for Regional Development: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank all the Members who commented on the Bill during the debate on Second Stage. Some general issues and several specific points were raised, and I will try to deal with all of those. However, as is the practice, I will study the Hansard report, and if I have missed any significant points, I will respond in writing to the Members who raised them.

I thank the Committee Chairperson, the Deputy Chairperson and all the Committee members who spoke in support of the Bill. I also thank the Committee for its co-operation in trying to facilitate the smooth passage and proper scrutiny — as is its function — of several pieces of legislation that are before it. I intend to ensure that the Department co-operates as best it can and that we work together to pass the legislation following proper scrutiny from the Committee.

The Chairperson raised the issue of cost, and Tommy Gallagher further developed that theme. The introduction of permit schemes is essential for the better management and control of all works on the roads. Members spoke about the need to better regulate such works and to ensure that roads are properly reinstated after they have been dug up by utilities or other organisations, including Roads Service, which have access to them. The cost of introducing a scheme can be kept to a minimum by using the existing computerised street-works register and notification system to manage permits.

Tommy Gallagher asked whether permits are, effectively, a tax on utilities to raise revenue. Utilities have statutory rights to place and maintain their apparatus on the roads, but those rights must be controlled to avoid unnecessary congestion and disruption to road users. Both the Committee for Regional Development and the Public Accounts Committee have strong views on that. Permits will assist the Department in the co-ordination of all roadworks, and the fees for the permits will be set at a level that will cover the administrative costs of running the scheme rather than generate revenue. The permits are intended to create better control and

co-ordination of works. Inevitably, an administrative cost will be associated with permit schemes, but the fees will cover that cost and will not be used by Roads Service to generate revenue.

Danny Kinahan raised an issue about the ability of the councils to become involved in the process and asked whether powers would be transferred to them. In cases where it is suitable for functions to be exercised at local government level, I am keen that we play our part in devolving them. As the Deputy Chairperson and other Members said, the closure of roads is one of the functions that local government and councils can, quite rightly, exercise.

Some organisations, including the PSNI, are unclear about who is responsible for, and has the legal power to, close roads. By clarifying the position, the Bill will give some comfort not only to the organisations and agencies involved, but to the promoters, the general public, the councils and the community and voluntary sector, all of which may wish to host events on streets and roads. To ensure that that is done in a consistent way and that the councils are aware of their responsibilities, the Department may issue guidance to councils, and they must have regard to that when considering whether to make an order.

If an event crosses a council boundary, the promoter will be required to seek authority from both councils. That will ensure a level of co-ordination between councils. The Department and the PSNI must also be consulted on any road closures. The Department will be involved in providing councils with guidance to make sure that there is a consistent approach and no confusion between councils, particularly where an event straddles a council border.

I very much welcome the comments from Members and the level of support shown for the Bill. Undoubtedly, the Committee will have further issues to tease out in its scrutiny of the legislation. I and my officials look forward to working with the Committee on that and to continued engagement with the Committee and Members as the Bill progresses through its legislative stages. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA 6/09] be agreed.

Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call on the Minister for Regional Development to move the Consideration Stage of the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill.

Moved. — [The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy).]

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. However, the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, Mr Fred Cobain, will speak to clause 1.

Clause 1 (Grants to water and sewerage undertakers: extension of initial period)

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): As Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee, I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Consideration Stage of the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill. The purpose of the Bill is to ensure the continued provision of customer subsidies to Northern Ireland Water in the absence of funding from customer charging.

At Second Stage, the Committee for Regional Development supported the principles of the Bill, and following Committee Stage, its report was published on 6 January 2010. During Committee Stage, the Committee received written submissions from Northern Ireland Water, the Utility Regulator, the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Committee, Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NICITU). In October and November 2009, the Committee took oral evidence from Northern Ireland Water, the Consumer Council, the Minister for Regional Development, officials from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and the trade unions. The Committee recognised that the Bill is largely technical in nature. During its clause-by-clause scrutiny, the Committee considered the evidence received and agreed to all clauses without amendment.

At Second Stage, the Committee decided to seek clarification on the cost of continued deferral. That included the costs associated with the reclassification of Northern Ireland Water for public expenditure purposes, the basis for valuing Northern Ireland Water assets and its ongoing ability to claim input VAT. The Committee sought clarity on the financial impact that ongoing deferral may have on the Northern Ireland block, on the Department for Regional Development budget, and on the budgets of other Departments. The Committee also sought clarification on those issues

during Committee Stage, the report of which reflects the evidence taken and the information received.

At the time of considering the Committee Stage report, the Committee was generally satisfied that further clarification was not available on the budgetary and financial implications of the continued deferral of water charges. The Committee understands from witnesses that greater clarity is unlikely to be available unless or until the Executive make a decision on funding arrangements for, and provision of, water and sewerage services in Northern Ireland. The Committee continues to be of the view that the budgetary and financial implications of the Executive's decision on water and sewerage services and the reclassification of Northern Ireland Water should not fall on the Department for Regional Development but should be addressed by the Executive. The Committee is firmly of the view that those costs should be fully discussed and debated in an open and transparent manner.

The Committee welcomes the Minister's ongoing commitment to consult it during any decisions on the future and funding of water and sewerage services. I want to express the Committee's thanks to the witnesses who provided evidence, to the Department's Bill team for its co-operation and assistance during Committee Stage and to Committee staff for their work in producing the Bill report.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Miss McIlveen): I welcome the opportunity to speak to the Consideration Stage of the Bill, and I will be brief.

As the Chairperson said, this short, technical Bill will ensure that subsidy continues to be paid to Northern Ireland Water while water charges continue to be deferred. Essentially, therefore, it is necessary legislation that is designed to make sure that the Executive not only keep their promises around the deferral of water charges but retain the option to continue deferral. I believe that the decision not to pass on charges to private customers at this time has been one of the most positive moves made by the Executive and one which saves families hundreds of pounds each year during the deep, global financial crisis. Decisions such as that are often lost on the public and ignored by the media as it seeks to criticise the political institutions.

Concerns were raised by the Committee prior to the deliberations. Those concerns were explored, but, although important to future decisions that may have to be taken, they were not deemed relevant to the Bill. After careful consideration of the clauses in Committee and after we heard evidence from key stakeholders, it was decided that the Bill should proceed unamended. In their appreciation that the Bill is largely technical in nature, all the parties are showing unity of thought.

11.00 am

I echo the Chairperson's comments, in which he welcomed the Minister's commitment to consult the Committee before decisions are taken on future funding decisions that relate to water and sewerage services.

I thank the witnesses who provided evidence to the Committee, the Department for its assistance to us during the Committee Stage and, of course, the Committee Clerk and the Committee staff.

Mr Gallagher: I, too, will be brief, Mr Speaker. Even if you permitted me to open up a debate on water charges, it would probably not be a good day for it. I welcome the Minister's commitment to come back to the Committee before future funding decisions are made on water and sewerage services, and I look forward to the debate on water charges, whenever it happens.

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

It is clear that, if the Executive decide not to implement water charges, there will be a lot of issues to discuss. Payment for a deferral of water charges will come from the block grant, and we will need to be clear about what services may be cut if we go down that road. As I said, I look forward to getting into the detail of that at another time.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the support for the Bill from the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee. I thank them and the Committee for their co-operation, their interest and the level of scrutiny that they brought to the discussion.

As they said, the Bill makes a technical change to ensure the continued provision of customer subsidy to Northern Ireland Water from 31 March 2010. Wider questions on future funding for water and sewerage services are matters for the Executive. The Executive have given a commitment to consult on any decision, and I confirm my commitment to engage with the Committee in that process.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

European Issues

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 15 minutes to propose and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on its inquiry into consideration of European issues; and calls for enhanced engagement and improved interaction with the European institutions to raise the profile of Northern Ireland in Europe.

In spite of ongoing political events outside the Chamber, the motion's subject matter is important and should receive serious attention from the House. Before commenting on the substantive matter before the House, I express my gratitude to the people who assisted the Committee during the inquiry.

The inquiry generated substantial interest. We received 41 written submissions and held 34 oral evidence sessions. On behalf of the Committee, I express gratitude to everyone who provided evidence during the inquiry. That includes oral evidence from Northern Ireland's Members of the European Parliament, the chairman of the House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee, the Houses of the Oireachtas Joint European Committees and numerous other key stakeholders. In addition to taking oral evidence locally, the Committee made a number of important visits, including visits to the Parliament of Catalonia, the House of Commons, the House of Lords, the Scottish Parliament and the Houses of the Oireachtas. The Committee has learned a great deal about best practice from those Parliaments, and the report's actions and recommendations reflect that.

I thank the people whom we met for taking the time to share their experience of and expertise on Europe with our Committee. Moreover, I thank my Committee colleagues for their commitment to the inquiry and for the constructive and collective approach that all members took. The Committee has brought forward a total of 12 actions for Assembly Committees and 17 recommendations for the Speaker, the Assembly Commission and the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Those actions and recommendations seek to improve scrutiny of European legislation, enhance engagement with the European institutions and promote Northern Ireland as an active region of Europe.

I place on record my thanks to the Committee staff for their work in arranging what was a major inquiry. I

also record my appreciation of the Assembly's Research and Library Services for the high-quality research and analysis provided to the Committee. Furthermore, I thank Hansard staff for their patient and accurate reporting of the evidence sessions that were held with 34 organisations and individuals.

In early evidence sessions, members heard that a study had found that European policies affected 80% of the Programme for Government. During the inquiry, the Committee gained an understanding of the importance of concentrating on Europe and on prioritising issues to ensure that Northern Ireland is involved in the development of European legislation and policies.

There has been long-standing European financial support for Northern Ireland as one of the priority regions under the European cohesion policy. In the period 2000-06, six programmes, including the Peace II programme, received European aid of some €2.2 billion. For the current planning period of 2007-2013, Northern Ireland has six programmes, with a European contribution of €1.1 billion. The six programmes are Peace III; the competitiveness and employment programme; the Northern Ireland European social fund programme; the territorial co-operation programme with western Scotland and Ireland; the rural development programme; and the fisheries programme. Those programmes cover a wide range of areas but are specifically targeted to the pursuit of growth and the jobs agenda.

The funding has been invested in Northern Ireland, and the production of the Northern Ireland task force report proves that Northern Ireland has an important role to play in Europe. That report highlights the importance of networking in Europe, particularly with the European Commission. The report advised that contact with Commission departments should be established on a more systematic basis, and, as a result, there is improving awareness in Northern Ireland of the different possibilities that EU policies offer and of how to compete for support in different fields. To that end, the Committee is pleased that the European Commission has seconded an official to the Department to provide advice and co-ordination on European policy and European engagement.

The Committee agreed to hold an inquiry into the consideration of European issues at its meeting on 8 October 2008. The inquiry considered how legislation and directives that originate from the European institutions are implemented in Northern Ireland. It also considered the best approach for the Assembly and the Executive to take to ensure that Northern Ireland has an input into European legislation and directives. The Committee seeks to highlight the importance of a joined-up and cohesive approach to the European institutions, and actions and recommendations in the report show how Northern Ireland can improve in that

area through networking, the sharing of information and having an increased presence in Europe.

The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister agreed that it will continue its role in scrutinising Europe, albeit in an enhanced and focused manner, and that now is not the most appropriate time to form a new Standing Committee of the Assembly to deal solely with European issues.

The Speaker informed the Committee that the consideration of European issues will be crucial to the Assembly's future effectiveness and that the Assembly Commission has discussed the importance of the Assembly's ability to scrutinise European policy and engage with the European institutions. The Committee understands that the large amount of legislation and policy that emanates from Europe would make it impossible to scrutinise all legislation, policies or Green and White Papers. Therefore, it will seek to prioritise the areas of legislation and policy on which it can have input and a development role. The report outlines actions whereby the Committee can receive regular briefing sessions from Northern Ireland's representatives in Europe. That will help the Committee to share information, form opinions and prioritise the many European issues that it will consider. It will further ensure a strong and cohesive approach in conveying the view of Northern Ireland to the European institutions.

The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will seek to become involved in European legislation and directives at as early a stage as possible by prioritising issues of relevance. The Committee will also seek and consider detailed briefings on the European Commission's legislative and work programme. At an early stage, the Committee will also engage with the holder of the presidency of the European Council to discuss the presidency's priorities and to consider how it can become involved in the development of policy.

The Committee recognises that all Statutory Committees of the Assembly realise the importance of their role when dealing with European issues and of prioritising those issues to ensure that Northern Ireland has an active role in developing European policy and legislation. The Committee recommends, therefore, that Departments take into consideration European policies and directives when completing business plans and strategies and that departmental officials brief Statutory Committees regularly on European matters.

To aid the prioritisation of European issues, the Committee recommends that the Assembly's Research and Library Services screen the European Commission's legislative and work programme and produce a prioritised menu relevant to each Statutory Committee. Research and Library Services should continue to monitor the development of European policy topics that are of

particular interest to Statutory Committees, thereby ensuring that they can have input into policies and legislation.

Once a year, probably in the autumn, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will request from each Statutory Committee an annual report providing details of its activity on European issues. The Committee will then formulate a report that will be submitted to the Business Committee for plenary debate.

The Committee agreed that the Assembly Commission should develop a European engagement strategy to aid the Assembly in its enhanced involvement in Europe. Such a strategy may include appropriate opportunities for Assembly staff to be seconded to the various European institutions to build their knowledge and expertise on Europe.

During evidence sessions, the Assembly and its Committees were repeatedly criticised for not becoming involved in European proposals and directives early enough and for being reactive instead of proactive. The Committee regards the appointment of an officer in Brussels as central to playing an active role in Europe.

A Brussels officer would be able to engage with the European institutions and the United Kingdom Government at a much earlier stage in the process of developing legislation and policies. That would help to ensure that the Assembly could provide input into the strategic direction of European legislation and policies at an early stage. The officer would be a representative of the Assembly, not simply of the Executive.

11.15 am

The Committee has made recommendations to the First Minister and deputy First Minister about their role and the role of the Executive in enhancing Northern Ireland's status in Europe and promoting Northern Ireland as a region. There is a need for closer working relationships with Northern Ireland's representatives in Europe so that Northern Ireland's position can be jointly presented in all the European institutions. There is also a need for Ministers to work closely with their UK ministerial counterparts to ensure that Northern Ireland's views are taken on board. The Committee sees the Joint Ministerial Committee on Europe as a key forum for putting across the Northern Ireland perspective.

The Committee also recommends that the Northern Ireland Executive continue to be proactive in seeking opportunities for their Ministers to be actively engaged in European business, including attendance at the European Council of Ministers. The Committee is aware of the important role played by the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels, and we experienced at first hand the expertise of staff in the office during a fact-finding visit. However, concerns

were raised in evidence that the office may be under-resourced and overstretched. To that end, the Committee has recommended that the First Minister and deputy First Minister carry out a review of the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels and consider whether it is sufficiently resourced to enable it to perform productively and keep abreast of all relevant developing issues.

Ministers should also consider the possibility of locating other representatives, including other Northern Ireland Departments, local government and other sector experts, in the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels. The Committee would point to Scotland House, Team Wales and the West Midlands model as examples of good practice in Europe.

Through its inquiry into consideration of European issues, the Committee has sought to produce a comprehensive set of actions and recommendations that will ensure a joined-up approach to Europe and ensure that Northern Ireland continues to play an important role in Europe. The Committee looks forward to the responses from the Statutory Committees, the Assembly Commission and the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and it expects the report to be the basis for the Assembly and Executive in enhancing engagement with European institutions and in seeing the region of Northern Ireland become more fully involved in relevant legislation and policy.

I look forward to hearing the contributions of Members and commend the report to the House.

Mr Spratt: I apologise for not being in the Chamber for the opening remarks of the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I was chairing the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

I am pleased to be able to speak as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Assembly does not have a European engagement strategy at present, and it is important that it have one. During the Committee's visits to Committees in the House of Commons, House of Lords, Scottish Parliament and in the South, we saw that engagement with many European matters was important. It is important that we have a degree of networking and support in Europe.

Northern Ireland is already represented in Europe through its MEPs; representatives on the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee; the European Commission Office in Belfast; the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels; and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. That provides a reasonable base for the creation of work in Europe.

The report advises against the creation of a European Committee for the time being. It recommends instead

that each departmental Committee scrutinise the European legislative issues that are relevant to it. It also recommends strengthening links with other regional and national legislatures in Europe and having regular briefings among all our representatives.

The report details recommendations for the attention of the Assembly Commission as well as the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. During some of our evidence sessions, a list of ministerial visits was provided to the Committee by the Office of the First and deputy First Minister. There has been a significant enhancement in the number of those visits since devolution, and there has also been increased engagement on various issues with the European Parliament on other EU issues.

During the Committee's visit to Brussels, we saw the necessity of networking in Europe. That is important, particularly in areas such as research and development. The Committee observed that some other regions had good networking systems in Europe, and we need to examine and improve that area. More must be done to ensure that Northern Ireland is effectively networked and that opportunities for any possible grant aid and so forth are available in the European system.

The Committee agreed the nine recommendations in the report on an all-party basis. I commend the report to the Assembly.

Ms Anderson: Éirím chun tacaíocht a thabhairt don mholadh.

I support the motion. As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I was privy to many of the deliberations and discussions that informed the content of the report. The Committee took evidence from a huge number of organisations and individuals as part of its inquiry into European issues. I thank everyone who took the time and effort to engage with that process.

There was a strong, common theme in the evidence that the Committee took, namely that the Assembly and the Executive need to further enhance relationships with various European institutions. That would enable the North to play a more active role in the shaping of European policy, as well as benefiting from the opportunities that Europe provides. It was abundantly clear that the North is missing out on many opportunities because of a lack of engagement with Europe. That concern was raised by Bairbre de Brún MEP and other MEPs from the North.

One of the main concerns raised by the Federation of Small Businesses during its evidence session to the Committee was the failure of the North to capitalise on the European multiannual programme for enterprise and entrepreneurship. That was a European funding scheme particularly aimed at small and medium-sized enterprises. However, the FSB warned that local firms

did not benefit from the finance that was available. That largely occurred during the period of direct rule.

As Committee member Jimmy Spratt said, our engagement with Europe has accelerated since these institutions have been up and running. However, the Federation of Small Businesses warned that we are still not exploiting many of the available European funding streams because of our failure to engage fully with Europe. Two of the so-called big four banks here failed to take advantage of a multibillion-euro pot to assist small and medium-sized enterprises. Those banks failed to draw down funds from the European Investment Bank, which made €30 billion available over two years to help SMEs that are struggling in the economic recession to access credit.

It was a similar story with the European globalisation adjustment fund. Other regions have tapped into that €500 million fund, which assists in retraining and reskilling the workforce when major employers go under, but, unfortunately, we have not. Those are just some of the examples that we heard during the evidence sessions of how our lack of engagement and interaction with European structures has a direct, tangible and detrimental impact on our communities. Throughout the inquiry, it was clear that Administrations in other areas have been much more effective than us in engaging with Europe.

We hope that the recommendations and actions emanating from the report will correct some of that. I am of the firm belief that we must work together on an all-Ireland basis and, where necessary, create new engagement structures to ensure that we maximise our voice in Europe and make the most of all the available opportunities. I fully endorse the report, which identifies a series of actions to be undertaken by the Assembly's scrutiny Committees and makes key recommendations to the Assembly and the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Chairperson, Danny Kennedy, dealt with some of those earlier, and Members will be glad to hear that I do not intend to go through them all again. Once implemented, those actions and recommendations will go a long way towards greatly improving the North's cohesiveness and direction and its influence in Europe. As a member of the Committee who, like many others, helped to compile the report, I commend it to the Chamber.

Mrs D Kelly: I speak as a former member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and on behalf of the SDLP. Our current Committee member, Mr Alex Attwood, sends his apologies. He has business elsewhere this morning; let us hope that it is fruitful.

European matters are serious, and people here in the North have been far too insular and inward-looking for far too long. Europe controls much of our business in

the House and elsewhere through its directives and legislation. Indeed, more than 70% of our legislation emanates from Europe. The report's recommendations are sensible, appropriate and, indeed, long overdue. I commend the Chairperson and the Committee for their work on the inquiry, which is a detailed and inclusive piece of work.

The Committee heard evidence from across the sector, both from statutory agencies and the voluntary and community sector. In the early stages, there was quite a bit of consideration and deliberation about whether there ought to be a subcommittee or a Committee formed to examine European matters. Those discussions have not yet led to a considered response, but I think that it would be preferable if there were a subcommittee devoted to Europe.

Mr Jimmy Spratt mentioned our Ministers' involvement in Europe. Some Ministers' attendance records are better than others, but I understand that some Ministers have yet to attend any meetings in Brussels. That is to our detriment, because Europe presents opportunities for the people whom we represent both in finance and influencing policymaking at an early stage. When the Committee for the Environment, of which I am the Chairperson, visited Brussels, it struck members that we come in at far too late a stage to influence policies.

We need to invest more money and resources in Europe.

11.30 am

I particularly welcome recommendation 11, which relates to the responsibilities of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to set up a mechanism through which community and voluntary sector agencies can have representatives in Europe and avail themselves of the secondment opportunities that are currently available for civil servants.

We hear from other Departments, particularly the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Department of the Environment (DOE), that there is too much reliance on GB legislation in the implementation of EU directives. Often, the cry is that there is gold-plating. The very essence of having devolution is to look at legislation that meets the needs of the people whom we represent and provides the best way ahead for them.

We have heard, on many occasions, the cry of how the gold-plated EU directives are having a substantive financial impact on our farming community. Recently, I noted that the South of Ireland is seeking to derogate from tags on goats and other animals — some of the farmers here can keep us right on that. That derogation is not yet being sought by our farming Minister. It needs to be sought because I think that the tagging will cost the industry an additional €15 million, which is totally

unacceptable. Many people will believe that Whitehall has too much of an undue influence on EU directives that ignore the needs of even the north of England. We very much need to have our own representatives battling in the European structures for the people here.

The Committee's recommendations are also to be looked at in respect of making the best use of whatever financial and funding opportunities are presented to us. That was one of the outcomes of the Barroso report, but we are still not availing ourselves of the opportunities. As other Members have already said, networking is the key. That was the message, time and again, from all of those who gave evidence to the Committee. The South of Ireland, in particular, puts a lot of resource into networking and getting to know —

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

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Committee's recommendations and urge the House to support them in full.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the resolution that is before the House. I apologise on behalf of our deputy leader, Naomi Long, who is part of the Committee. Unfortunately, through no fault of her own, she has had to devote her attentions elsewhere this morning. I support the recommendations.

Northern Ireland has benefited greatly from being in the European Community. I have been to visit the centre in Brussels, where a lot of good work goes on. I support the resolution on behalf of my party.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As this is the first occasion on which the Assembly will hear from Mr Jonathan Bell, I remind the House that the convention is that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr Bell: I declare my interest as the chairperson of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) working group and also as a member of the Committee of the Regions, the East Border Region Committee and the Special EU Programmes Body.

I have been given the enormous privilege of representing the Strangford constituency, which must, above all, be one of the most beautiful constituencies in the United Kingdom. It is a tremendous privilege to follow on. I have worked in family and childcare social work for 21 years. For the last 13 of those, I have been a fieldwork officer as a senior practitioner in the Family Resource Centre in James Street, Newtownards. I pay tribute to the many staff there. Released yesterday were the figures of the number of referrals that have, unfortunately, been received — particularly, in the past year — in relation to child sexual abuse. I pay tribute to the dedicated staff of all backgrounds, the work of whom I have left to take a career break. Those people

continue to work in what must be one of the most difficult set of circumstances in any employment area.

John Donne said: "No man is an island". In my maiden speech, I pay tribute to my parents, who sacrificed much to give their three boys an education. From the age of nine, I grew up in east Belfast. Lord Morrow was born in Dungannon in his constituency, but I was rushed to west Belfast to be born in the Royal Victoria Hospital, where I was kept for some weeks. I spent my childhood growing up in east Belfast.

My party leader, Peter Robinson, has been my Member of Parliament since I was nine. I learned a lot from him about service. Whenever we sent him a letter on behalf of our church or of those who asked us to, without fail, a letter always came back by return post, acknowledging our letter and indicating the work that he would do on our behalf. Peter Robinson never failed or delayed, and he always sent us a letter by return post. That taught me a lot about the Democratic Unionist Party's constituency service, and I would like to emulate that.

For years, my predecessor, Iris Robinson, had a distinguished role working night and day for the people of Strangford. She worked hard on issues such as housing and health, and she met people. For a long time, my social service office was beside hers, and I know that she worked night and day for people. I place on record my gratitude for the example that she gave of working hard for a constituency. I will also seek to emulate that work.

I pay tribute to the staff of Strandtown Primary School in east Belfast, Sullivan Upper School and Queen's University for giving me and others an education that allowed us to make progress in our careers. The General Epistle of James tells us:

"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God".

I will follow that example and seek that wisdom.

Returning to the debate, we must look at the enhanced focus on European matters, and we must target the issues through scrutiny. We must closely examine the work programme and priorities of the EU president to see what opportunities Northern Ireland can develop and enhance. As has been said, we need synergy between our Executive Ministers and those of the United Kingdom Government. We need a better understanding of the mechanics of Europe so that we can access and target our resources to maximise benefits for the people of Northern Ireland. That is difficult, because often one sits on European committees without seeing much progress, but then some gradually emerges.

That was the case for those of us who sat on the East Border Region Committee for a number of months, until we saw progress in the form of a major

grant to an equestrian centre in Greyabbey. Tourism iPods were introduced in Mountstewart outside Newtownards, and, temporarily, in Portaferry. Christian Heritage was linked into St Patrick's Trail so that tourism facilities for Strangford would be enhanced.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to my former colleagues in the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, from which I had to resign because I cannot serve in both places.

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

Mr Bell: Professor Colin Harvey of the commission sent me a lovely text to tell me that politics is still a noble pursuit. With God's help, I will pursue it to the best of my ability.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo thacaíocht a chur in iúl don rún fosta.

I commend the motion. It is a no-brainer that the Assembly requires a European engagement strategy. I am sure that everyone agrees with that. How could we hope to maximise our influence in the European Union without such a strategy? Without an engagement strategy, we would surely continue to miss opportunities to promote this region to the full. Níl aon dabht faoi sin.

As a representative of West Tyrone, I am conscious that the European Union's key function is to help to overcome the negative social and economic impact of borders in Europe, including borders on the island of Ireland. That has obvious relevance for constituencies such as mine, where organisations such as the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) administer INTERREG funding programmes. Such bodies have done good work in trying to overcome the negative social and economic impact of the border, along which two currencies and two systems of everything operate. Surely, greater engagement with Europe can bring only benefits for communities such as those that I described.

In the Assembly, the EU is everyone's business. Recently, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure looked at the European Commission's culture programme, and we scrutinised the degree of engagement or participation with the Commission among arts organisations that were trying to access funding. We found that only 12 organisations in the North had engaged directly with the culture programme, and we encouraged the Arts Council to expand its work specifically in that area. We need that sort of focus, because the EU is everyone's business. In addition, it would be a good idea for every Committee to feed into a report on EU matters, at least annually, and for the Assembly to conduct a plenary debate on that report.

It is important that we engage better with our MEPs. For example, when MEPs addressed the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, it came to my attention that they do not have a special pass to gain admission to this Building. The situation may have been corrected since then, but, at the time, although MEPs deserve to be able to engage directly with the Assembly, they had to go through normal security procedures to gain admission.

It is essential that issues be prioritised, and I agree with the emphasis that Dolores Kelly placed on doing that. She said that we have to secure influence, at the earliest stage possible, on policy formulation and development. I direct Members' attention to recommendation 9 in the report, which suggests that Ministers should be more:

“proactive in seeking opportunities for its Ministers to be actively engaged with European business affecting their interests including attendance at the European Council of Ministers.”

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is a case in point; major benefits will surely accrue if the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development can secure a full seat on the European Council of Ministers. If we rely on UKRep — British Government representation — our particular agricultural or rural circumstances cannot possibly be reflected or represented.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I speak today on behalf of the Assembly Commission. The Commission welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's 'Report on the Inquiry into Consideration of European Issues'.

At the Assembly Commission's meeting on 10 December 2009, the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, my colleague Mr Danny Kennedy, provided a very helpful overview of the issues in the report that are relevant to the Commission. I commend the Committee on the detail in the report, and I welcome its proposals to further enhance the Assembly's relationship with the European institutions.

The report contains a number of recommendations for consideration by the Assembly Commission, the first of which encourages the Commission to consult the Committee of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister before making decisions on any European issue. The Commission is keen to build on its existing relationship with the Committee, and it will work to make progress on moving the relevant matters forward. We will also consider the detail proposed and the framework required for developing a European engagement strategy, including the benefits of appointing a parliamentary officer based in Brussels, aimed at supporting and developing our relationships with the European institutions.

11.45 am

Members will be aware that the Commission has agreed a comprehensive engagement strategy for the Assembly and has facilitated a number of visits to the European institutions. In early February 2010, the Northern Ireland Assembly and Business Trust will be taking part in a visit to Brussels aimed at fostering greater links with Europe, with an emphasis on issues relevant to the business sector. Further recommendations relate to areas of professional development for staff and Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Commission will explore each of those in detail.

We acknowledge the value and benefits that training on European matters will bring to staff and Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and in tandem with the European institutions, our secretariat officials and appropriate business areas, we will explore the options for enhancing training and professional development opportunities in that field.

The Commission plans to visit Brussels as part of its forward work programme for 2010, and we hope that that visit will allow us to gain a greater understanding of the application of the recommendations outlined in this very good report. The Commission will give further consideration to the recommendations set out in the report at a future meeting and looks forward to working with the OFMDFM Committee to progress those matters.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Newton): I welcome the opportunity to respond on the important issue of engagement with Europe. First, I apologise to the Deputy Speaker and to Members for not being here at the commencement of the debate.

This has been a time of great change in Europe. After a period of some uncertainty, we have a new European Commission, a newly elected Parliament and the Lisbon Treaty has come into force. The newly appointed President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, working with the Spanish President, has just taken over the reins of the Council of the European Union, and he is now tasked with implementing the institutional changes resulting from the treaty achieving its full enforcement. Spain is assuming the presidency at a key moment, as we recover from the worst economic crisis in decades. Its main priority is to give impetus to economic recovery and job creation, balanced against the more sustainable model for economic growth.

President Barroso, who has been a good friend to Northern Ireland, has secured a second term of office as head of the European Commission, and we have every reason to believe that his high level of interest in Northern Ireland will continue in his new term of office. His new commissioners designate are engaged in European parliamentary hearings.

The Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee are also in the process of renewing their mandates for 2010-14. The Assembly played a key role in securing nominees for the Committee of the Regions, and I congratulate Mr Molloy, Mr Dallat, Jonathan Bell and Arnold Hatch on their appointments.

Against the backdrop of substantial constitutional and operational change in Brussels, Europe has in recent months been marking time in relation to its strategic direction and priorities. That has made our job more difficult as we seek to identify the issues emerging from Brussels that are of most importance to us and as we seek to set our priorities and protect our interests. A key priority for the Spanish presidency is a new strategy for growth in jobs, including a debate on the EU 2020 strategy to develop a European economy that is increasingly based on investment in R&D, innovation, education and competitiveness. That falls much in line with the announcement by Minister Foster to the House yesterday. Our debate today will inform us as we adjust and renew our engagement with Europe. It marks a time of policy renewal for us, set against the backdrop of Europe moving into a new era and out of global recession.

I very much welcome the careful work of Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in producing its report. I am aware that its members have taken comprehensive evidence from stakeholders both locally and in Brussels. There is no doubt that contributions such as the report, which are thoughtful and constructive, add to the quality and nature of the public debate. I welcome debate on European matters; that is central to the development of sound policy responses to European legislative proposals.

I thank Committee members for their detailed and valuable work in producing the report. I have had the opportunity for only slight initial insight of the document. It will take time to consider all of its conclusions in more detail. There are 12 actions for Statutory Committees; a recommendation for the Speaker; six recommendations for the Assembly Commission; and 10 recommendations for OFMDFM. Although the Department received the report at the end of last week and, therefore, further work and analysis will have to be carried out, I can indicate to the Assembly that we agree with much of the report.

The report contains an analysis of the current situation. It provides a context in which the Assembly and the Executive can interact better to further enhance European goals. That is extremely helpful. It makes it clear that European policy impacts deeply on the majority of the Assembly and Executive's work. We must operate within the European system, ensuring that we not only pursue our interests, but fulfil our legal obligations. We should continuously appraise

how we can better influence European institutions in key policy areas that impact on devolved responsibilities. A key determinant of our success will be a focused approach that results in a clear, strong voice in Europe.

All Ministers, Committees and people who are involved in the policy process, which includes civil society, need to understand the wider European system within which key policies are developed and laws are made. OFMDFM has a major role to play in helping to develop the Executive's strategic approach to Europe and in taking forward co-ordination with European matters. In that task, we can only be assisted by the Committee's advice and support in raising awareness of key issues.

The Executive are committed to effective European engagement, which is a crucial task for any modern, forward-looking region. As the debate on Europe's strategic priorities begins, we will participate in and contribute to it. We will do that in an informed and broadly based way that reflects not only the Executive's views, but those of all stakeholders.

As I said, the inquiry report has 10 recommendations for OFMDFM. It will take time to consider each of them carefully and to reflect on the report in its entirety. It would be not be right to respond in detail to a work of that depth at short notice. The proposals have implications for other Departments and, indeed, may impact on other actions that the Assembly will take forward. We must analyse what is proposed and consider the resource implications. Therefore, I cannot say that we accept the report in its entirety or that we will implement in detail every one of its recommendations, because there are many matters to be considered. All of those will be considered carefully and set against the limitations on departmental resources for 2010-11 and beyond. We will respond with respect to our priorities and secure the most effective and efficient use of our resources.

I take the opportunity to offer observations on the recommendations that relate to OFMDFM. The European work area is complex, and the volume of documentation is heavy. Clearly, the Assembly will need to consider carefully the best way to ensure clarity in respect of relationships between Departments and the appropriate Committees on key cross-cutting issues. That will be crucial to successful engagement.

Much good work has been done on European training and secondments, a point with which, I am pleased to say, the report agrees. Under the Lisbon Treaty, the European Parliament has gained new co-decision powers. In anticipation of the treaty's entering into force, the Executive's Brussels office, in conjunction with the Scottish and Welsh devolved Administrations, participated in an event at the

Parliament's Strasbourg seat to announce our engagement with MEPs and to raise our positive profile.

The report's suggestion that we might encourage greater liaison among all our European representatives, including those on the Committee of the Regions and on the European Economic and Social Committee, is worthy of further consideration. Better communication and co-operation, particularly on key issues, can only benefit Northern Ireland.

Many Members will know that our Brussels office recently moved to new and expanded premises, a fact that was referenced by the Acting First Minister at Question Time on 18 January 2010. That presents a timely opportunity to consider how we can optimise the use of that excellent resource for local government, civil society and other interests.

I welcome the report and the interest of the Committee. It has provided an endorsement of our strengthening EU approach and food for thought about new directions and potential improvements. It will require more detailed consideration than has been possible in the short time available before today's debate. That said, I hope that my response demonstrates our desire to advance our approach to the European Union in a constructive and participative way. In a number of respects, our existing approach is in tune with the spirit of the Committee's proposals, and we look forward to further discussion in the coming months.

I thank the Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Kennedy, and his colleagues for their detailed and constructive work. It is important that the Committee should be formally apprised of Ministers' views. We, therefore, intend to report formally to the OFMDFM Committee in due course and set out our response to each of the proposals.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister: I am grateful for the opportunity to make a winding-up speech on the debate. Given the day that is in it, the debate was useful and important. It is a reminder to the Assembly of the importance of Europe in the lives of this Administration and the people of Northern Ireland.

I repeat my thanks to the staff in the Assembly secretariat for their assistance during the inquiry, and I place on record my appreciation for the contributions from the organisations and individuals who submitted evidence. Furthermore, I am grateful to the Members who contributed positively to the debate on the report and to Dr Coulter, who spoke on behalf of the Assembly Commission, and junior Minister Robin Newton for their initial responses.

Members' contributions were positive, and I will give a summary of each of them. Mr Spratt highlighted the importance of networking in Europe and the degree of networking and support in other places such as the

House of Commons, the House of Lords, the Scottish Parliament and the Houses of the Oireachtas. He also spoke about strengthening the links with Northern Ireland's representatives in Europe.

Martina Anderson talked about the many opportunities available to Northern Ireland, and she highlighted the evidence from the Federation of Small Businesses, which stated that streams of available funding had not been tapped into. She stressed the importance of banks' drawing down that funding, which the European Investment Bank has made available for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Sadly, Dolores Kelly is no longer a member of the OFMDFM Committee. However, she mentioned the vast amount of legislation and directives that emanate from Europe and said that there is a need for further resources to be invested in building networks from the Assembly and Europe.

12.00 noon

Mr Elliott: Does the Chairperson accept that it is important to scrutinise the European legislation at an early stage? European legislation often has a negative impact on society in Northern Ireland, particularly for agriculture and the environment.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister: I am grateful to the Member for making that important point. Early knowledge of and early intervention on directives and other European legislation will be key to the Assembly's making Europe a greater success for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mrs Kelly highlighted the important role of the community and voluntary sector in Europe. I also welcome the positive comments that Kieran McCarthy made on behalf of the Alliance Party.

I welcome to the House and congratulate Mr Jonathan Bell on his maiden speech. It is a great honour to represent one's constituency and constituents, and I genuinely wish him well. He brings with him considerable experience on European matters, and I look forward to his bringing that to bear in future debates on issues that affect the Assembly.

Mr McElduff mentioned the cross-cutting nature of Europe. He is the Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, and he highlighted its work on European issues. He also said that prioritisation was of the utmost importance when seeking to have input into European policy and legislation.

I thank my party colleague Rev Dr Robert Coulter for responding on behalf of the Assembly Commission and for his positive contribution on the Committee's recommendations. The Committee looks forward to working with the Commission on those issues and on European matters generally. It is helpful that Dr

Coulter indicated that the Commission is prepared to explore the different options available for secondments and staff training. I welcome the fact that the Assembly Commission will be considering the recommendations at a future meeting.

I give a positive welcome to junior Minister Newton's statement that OFMDFM regards the report as a constructive piece of work. The Committee looks forward to working with the Department to implement the recommendations and to ensure that Northern Ireland plays a more active and beneficial role in European affairs. We want to prioritise the important issues, including those that will have a positive impact on the entire community here.

Today's debate represents the conclusion of the Committee's inquiry into the consideration of European issues. As was once more famously said:

"It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

The debate does not, therefore, signal the conclusion of the Committee's interest in the matter. As Members can see from the report, the Committee has set itself a number of key actions to take to involve itself more fully on European issues.

The motion calls for:

"enhanced engagement and improved interaction with the European institutions to raise the profile of Northern Ireland in Europe."

I assure the House that the Committee will work with the Assembly Commission and OFMDFM to ensure that there is enhanced engagement and improved interaction with Europe. In addition, we look forward to receiving formally the responses of the Assembly Commission and those of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to the report.

The Committee made recommendations on a wide range of issues that were reflected in the debate. European issues are very cross-cutting, covering matters from equality to quotas. Therefore, the Committee will seek the support and assistance of the other Statutory Committees in scrutinising the Department's work in Europe, and it will encourage those Committees to become more involved in the development of relevant legislation and policy.

The purpose of the Committee's inquiry and report is to help to promote Northern Ireland as an active region of the European Union that does not simply receive European funding but that is more fully involved in the development of legislation and policy and in the sharing of our experiences with the other regions of Europe. Therefore, I warmly commend the report to the House and ask for support for the Committee's motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on its inquiry into consideration of European issues; and calls for enhanced engagement and improved interaction with the European institutions to raise the profile of Northern Ireland in Europe.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 12.30 pm. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.07 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Special Educational Needs

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

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges the anxiety amongst parents and teachers of children with special educational needs regarding the future policy outlined in 'Every School a Good School - the Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion'; and calls on the Minister of Education to ensure that the policy brings clarity around the use of the term "inclusion", no diminution of the present statutory rights of children with special educational needs, early expert diagnosis and effective intervention, a fair balance of responsibility between schools and statutory agencies, and ring-fencing of resources to ensure that children with special educational needs benefit from delegated funding.

The consultation on special educational needs and inclusion has provoked more controversy than I can remember. Almost all of the disability rights groups in the North of Ireland, along with parents, teachers, teachers' unions and the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland, have expressed strong reservations about the changes proposed in the consultation document. Today I hope to concentrate on three aspects of that: early identification and intervention; co-ordinated support plans; and resources.

I will begin with the issue concerning the change of terminology from that which we were used to — early diagnosis and early intervention — to early interpretation and intervention. It is true that the classroom teacher, when reflecting on a pupil's learning, can identify barriers to learning and, in some cases, intervene appropriately to remove those barriers. However, where more complex needs exist, it is doubtful that a teacher, even with enhanced training and the assistance of a learning support co-ordinator, will be in a position to identify the underlying condition and intervene appropriately.

I attended one of the workshops provided by the Department, at which parents were told that an intervention might be tried for a year before its effectiveness would be reassessed and, if it were found to be ineffective, another intervention would be tried.

In that way, a year or more could be wasted on interventions that are neither appropriate nor effective. Identification, in the context of the consultation document, seems to be a form of observation, without the expertise necessary to lead to appropriate and effective intervention. Such an approach would lead to a hit-or-miss process, and we cannot afford to leave our children open to such a flawed approach.

Diagnosis is, of its nature, a more in-depth process, and requires the input of experts who can, on the basis of that expertise, give an authoritative assessment of a child's needs and determine an appropriate and effective intervention. Teacher observation of classroom learning can be extremely useful in raising concerns about barriers to learning that a child may be encountering and may lead to basic diagnostic testing. However, it is very important that teachers and learning support co-ordinators know their professional limitations and call in external expertise as early as possible so that an expert diagnosis can be completed and appropriate, effective intervention initiated.

I am concerned about the legal implications of that approach for teachers, in so far as a greater onus than at present will be placed on teachers, without the commensurate levels of expertise to fulfil the possible demands of the law. Appropriate diagnosis and intervention for pupils with, for example, autistic disorders, which are usually co-morbid with other disorders, may be delayed to the extent that their effectiveness will be reduced.

A learning support co-ordinator may be in a position to interpret signposts to autism, but, unless trained to master's degree level or above, he or she will not be able to diagnose the place of that pupil on the autistic spectrum or assess the nature of the required intervention. In such cases, an early professional diagnosis and an appropriate, effective intervention are required, neither of which would be available during the within-school stage. Autism experts suggest that, in many such cases, children should proceed to the second stage with the shortest possible delay.

The consultation document tends to delay expert diagnosis until the school has exhausted other types of intervention. In that context, the move away from external support and the placing of greater reliance on in-school interventions is worrying, because it may mean that diagnosis is delayed even beyond the current unacceptable timescale. A system that provides early, expert diagnosis and appropriate intervention as early as possible is required. Children, parents and teachers need the consultation to produce outcomes that accelerate the input from experts, not delay it still further.

Early diagnosis and early intervention are accepted as the most effective ways of ensuring that barriers to learning are reduced, if not completely eliminated, as

early as possible in a child's school life. Some parents, through observing their children in their earliest years, begin that process even before the child reaches school age.

Co-ordinated support plans are, arguably, among the most contentious of the range of proposals in the document. Paragraph 18.6(c) suggests that children who currently hold statements of special educational needs could lose them and not be given a co-ordinated support plan (CSP). That is extremely worrying for the many parents of children who currently hold statements, the many representative groups that advocate on behalf of children with disabilities and for teachers who have worked with children to ensure the provision of their statutory rights.

Many parents regard the move away from statutory assessment and statements of special educational needs as an erosion of their children's rights. It seems that, in future, CSPs and the support that accompanies them will be available only in exceptional circumstances. The emphasis will be more on personal learning plans being developed in school, which, once again, underlines the need for greater resources to be available to schools. According to the consultation document, such resources are far from guaranteed.

The Department of Education has not convinced parents and advocacy groups that the move from statements to co-ordinated support plans will be beneficial to children. In fact, many groups hold the view that the proposed change is a retrograde step. The Department has not convinced people that the removal of statements will improve provision.

The document proposes a change from the current one to five code of practice to a three-phase model of provision: within school; within school plus external support; and co-ordinated support plans. That change may not facilitate early diagnosis and appropriate early intervention; it may merely increase the responsibility placed on the classroom teacher and the school, and they may not have the level of expertise to fulfil that responsibility properly. The danger is that the in-school phase of the three-strand approach may become elongated, thus rendering void any advantage gained from the elimination of administrative rigidity.

Many of the changes implied in the document are predicated on the availability of the necessary resources. As I said, and according to the consultation document itself, those resources are by no means guaranteed. Without the necessary resources to implement the high principles, many parents feel that the proposals are comparable to theory that may never be put into practice. Parents are also concerned about the delegation of funding to schools without it being ring-fenced. Last week, departmental officials said that

the direction of travel was for schools to have control over that funding.

The Minister has said that the issue of special needs is one of her flagship themes. However, her proposals are wrong. The Minister should listen to the children, their parents, the teachers and their unions, and the disability groups, and take those proposals back to the drawing board. She should come back to the House with proposals that meet with the approval of children, parents, teachers, teachers' unions and disability groups. Only then will she have some chance of gaining the approval of the House. If she does not do that, the House will not support any legislation that she may bring forward on this issue.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education

(Mr Storey): I am glad to make my opening remarks as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education. I wrote to all Members yesterday to draw their attention to some important information that is on the Committee's website and which is relevant to today's debate. The Committee received a number of briefings about the Department's policy proposals from departmental officials and from organisations that represent children, parents and teachers who are directly affected by the proposals. The detailed submissions from the Children with Disabilities Strategic Alliance, which represents 46 organisations, and the briefing paper from the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council, which was submitted on behalf of the five teachers' unions, can be viewed on the Committee's website. Those groups and many other stakeholders have voiced concerns about the consultation documents.

The following comments will be made in my capacity as a Member of this House. I am glad that, for the first time, we have a motion that deals with inclusion, which all parties, including the Minister's party, support. The Minister should not ignore that, nor the effort that has been made by all Members who sit on the Committee for Education to reach a consensus to deal with the concerns that the proposals and the document give rise to.

The Minister's proposals contain major weaknesses. They contain very little detail, which is a point that has caused concern among professionals, and the Minister should take note of that. Her Department calls the proposals "high level". However, many consider them lightweight and without any substance or detail. They do, however, manage to cloud the essential issues around adequately delivering on special educational provision.

The Minister is presiding over a troubled panorama that is characterised by her and her officials' lack of focus and understanding. The consultation proposals fail to add clarity to the statutory obligations of the Department to concentrate on the effective management

of special needs education, and instead create the potential for diluting the focus and the policy.

How can the Minister reassure parents and professionals that her Department has a clear focus on the importance of statementing children accurately and effectively in future when there is a strong view that it has been getting harder to have an assessment of special educational needs (SEN) carried out?

Is the Department not aware that schools have been struggling with allocations for educational psychologists to come forward to carry out those assessments? The Minister should know that there is already a problem with delivery for children with special needs. She has failed to meet those needs.

I have spoken to many people who have concerns about special schools. Although it is important for the Department to continue to support the inclusion and integration of SEN pupils in mainstream schools, there is an obligation on the Minister to focus some of her attention on special schools within the scope of the consultation and address the long-standing issues about the absence of maximum enrolment numbers, overcrowding in special schools and the lack of sufficient funding and resources to support her Department's special schools provisions.

2.15 pm

Let me raise an issue that was brought to my attention before I entered the House today: temporary days' cover for special schools. In 2007-08, some 24,000 days of cover were provided. Can the Minister, if she is listening, assure me that that promotes a consistent service? I do not think so, and that needs to be addressed. I want to hear from the Minister on that today. It is unfortunate that we do not have sufficient time; five minutes is not nearly long enough to raise all the necessary issues in regard to the matter.

If the Minister thinks that she can dilute the current provision for children with special educational needs and introduce something inferior to cut costs and save money, she has got it fundamentally wrong.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up, Mr Storey.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Let me conclude with this.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Very quickly please.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: I call on the Minister to remember the words of the inspectorate, which said that the various agencies need to work more collaboratively and with greater impetus to improve identification, assessment and intervention.

It is time that the Minister delivered; perhaps, by the end of today, she will have run out of time because she may no longer be in office.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like other Members, I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. Let me begin by offering the apologies of my colleagues Michelle O'Neill, who is a co-sponsor of the motion, as the Member who spoke previously pointed out, and John O'Dowd, for not being able to take part in the debate.

I welcome the Minister's presence for the debate. Further to the words of the Member who has just spoken, I am not a fortune-teller, but I assume that the Minister supports the motion. Given that Members from each of the five main political parties have sponsored the motion, a clear message is given that, whatever may be going on in the bigger political picture, the Members in this Chamber deal with bread-and-butter issues. Members who sponsored the motion did so in order to change people's lives for the better.

Members have said, repeatedly, that society judges us on how we treat the most vulnerable. It is clear from reading the motion that all parties are serious about this issue and want to ensure that we treat the most vulnerable with the greatest respect and ensure that they get all necessary care in health, education, play, and resources. That is important. Five parties signed the motion, so I assume — I do not wish to speak for the Minister — that she will not oppose it. It is a collective motion, and it will be approved.

My party welcomes the consultation and review on special educational needs. We must also take on board that there have been two extensions to that consultation, which Dominic Bradley mentioned earlier. That sends out a message that people are listening.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Will the Member give way on that point?

Ms S Ramsey: I am sorry, Mervyn; I will not. I want to make my point. Normally, I give way, and I apologise for not doing so; however, I am conscious of the time, and there are other points that I want to make.

The purpose of a consultation exercise is to listen to the professionals and to the people who are affected directly or indirectly by the proposal. If as a society — or as Members, policymakers and lawmakers — we decide that we need an extension to the consultation, let us do that. We need to ensure that we have listened and that we get the policy right. That is another clear message that the debate must send; that is how we reassure parents, professionals and those who are affected by the proposal.

Assessments, and the level of support offered in all the board areas, must be highlighted. Members represent different constituencies, and most Members are involved in, or began in, local government. We deal with that on a daily basis depending on where we live. I represent an area that falls into the Assembly constituency of West Belfast, and I also represented

that area as a member of Lisburn City Council. That area is, therefore, caught in limbo, and it is difficult to know which education and library board to deal with, because the Belfast Board is two minutes down the road and the South Eastern Board is just up the road. All of that simply adds to the confusion.

When people start talking to one another, they realise that the timeline for a statement of needs has an impact on the families that are dealing with children who have special educational needs on a daily basis. We need to hear those families' real stories. If the process is flawed, we need to change it by making it easier for statements to be carried through. There is no point in a child getting a statement of needs for education if the health sector ignores it. We therefore need to ensure that a holistic approach is taken.

We welcome the review and the concept of inclusion. Children who face barriers to learning need to be given help to ensure that they receive every level of educational need so that they can move forward.

I also wish to address the speculation about special schools being closed as a result of the review. That is wrong, and my knowledge is that there are no plans to do that. If people are saying that, they need to be challenged, because they should not be allowed to hype up the issue in that way.

In conclusion, our objective, which the motion reflects, is to improve the system.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms S Ramsey: We want to ensure that there is a new beginning that enshrines the rights of everyone involved.

Mr B McCrea: I am conscious of the fact that we are debating an all-party motion, and, as such, it is appropriate that the language used is conciliatory and supportive. I realise that the Minister's attention is also focused on other issues, so it is good of her to be present for the debate.

Undoubtedly, there are concerns about the projected change, but that is the nature of change: people are sure about what they know and are worried about what might come in the future. The all-party motion is testament to the fact that we have a general concern about dealing with that anxiety. Some of that anxiety might have been caused by a lack of information or detail or by information not being presented in an appropriate way.

The Committee Chairperson mentioned the fine gathering in the Great Hall last week, at which people had the opportunity to put forward ideas and to try to get explanations. Parents and their groupings are still not convinced that we have really got the message. Therefore, we all have a job of work to do collectively to address that.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:

I thank the Member for giving way. I want to emphasise one point. The Minister accused me and my party of delaying the consultation for weeks. If the Minister — this is what worries me about Sue Ramsey's comments — had listened to the issues that we raised with her about why we did not want the policy document to go out for consultation in the first place, we would not be having to go back to her to raise those same issues. She has not been focused, and she has not been listening, either before the document went out for consultation or it seems — I hope that I am wrong — during the consultation.

Mr B McCrea: The Member makes his points in his style, and I will attempt to make my points in my style. Either way, the most vulnerable in society require our support. Members will know from the Register of Members' Interests that I chair the all-party Assembly group on learning disability, and I have also had quite a lot of interaction with some special schools. It is a privilege, an honour and somewhat humbling to be involved with those people, and it behoves us all to try to find the right way forward. Some of the points that Mr Storey raised need to be addressed. There is anxiety among parents that, if the security of a statement, which has legal status and provides an opportunity to appeal, is taken away, the resources that their children receive will also be taken away. We need to deal with that and with the lack of detail in the proposals.

As yet, nothing has been brought forward to explain why inclusivity issues and the European aspect of what is required are included in the consultation. There is a feeling that, in trying to deal with inclusivity, perhaps we have taken our eyes off the needs and, in particular, the special needs of children. There must be a balanced approach, and I hope that the Minister will address those matters in her response or at some other time.

The current system of statementing is unsatisfactory. We all accept the need for change and that something has to be done. I buy into the argument that it would be better to focus energy and resources on areas that really need them and to take away bureaucracy where it is not required. Communication is necessary to explain that that would be for the betterment of folk.

I am sure that the Minister is aware that, when it comes to funding, there is a feeling that, if a parent is looking after his or her own child, there are at least certain resources available but that there are perhaps better ways of pulling together resources so that schools can manage them. However, there is also concern that, if funding is given to schools as a block, it might be used in areas that are not appropriate for that particular child. Those are legitimate concerns, and we have to find a way to address them.

All of us on the Education Committee are aware of the fiscal problems facing the Department of Education and of the very difficult decisions that will have to be made. It is important that we give solidity and comfort to people and, when looking at any fiscal changes for special educational needs, we ensure that such changes are ring-fenced and protected. The biggest worry for people is that changes will be made without the money or the resources to follow through on the intentions.

In conclusion, I ask: what is the Assembly here to do? People look to us to see what can be achieved and what we can come together on. The passion shown, quite rightly, by the Members who spoke previously, shows how important the issue is. There is an opportunity for us, collectively, to try to do something better; to build a little bit of trust; to see if proper representation can get a proper and appropriate response; to do something that we can be proud of when we go back to our communities, having heard what people have to say —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr B McCrea: There is something incredibly positive in the process that I have witnessed. Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank you for your indulgence.

Ms Lo: The Alliance Party supports the motion. I am standing in for Trevor Lunn, who cannot be here. Although I am not a member of the Committee for Education, as a social worker, I do have some experience in helping families through the process of statementing. So often, that is a long and frustrating process for the children, parents and teachers involved. Waiting to be assessed by an educational psychologist can take a long time, and, of course, educational psychologists are in short supply.

The Alliance Party welcomes the Department's public consultation on reform and supports, in general, the principles of the proposed policy framework. However, we have some reservations around how those principles will be translated into practice.

Personally, I welcome the addition of the theme of inclusion, relating, as it does, to Traveller children and to children for whom English is an additional language. However, some clarification is needed on that. Currently, provision is made for those children. However, some ethnic minority communities are concerned that schools are not using resources to specifically target those children. If those children and young people were grouped under SEN, interventions to meet their educational needs may be more effective. It should not be a zero-sum game. The current provision could be included in the policy under SEN.

The Alliance Party is particularly concerned that the proposals would lead to the Department moving away from the use of statements. A lot of families have

contacted our offices to say that they do not want to see statements done away with, and we agree with them. Statements give families reassurance, because they show the exact needs of a child. They are also useful for children who have multiple disabilities. Co-ordinated support plans are not legal documents in the way that statements are. Schools and the education and library boards are legally obliged to carry out the provisions that are outlined in the statement. That legal protection would not apply to the co-ordinated support plans in their present form.

2.30 pm

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member agree that there are no guarantees on the rights that parents will have under the new proposals? At this stage, the Minister herself does not know what rights parents will have. In answer to a question from Mr Boylan in the House yesterday, she said:

“Depending on the detailed outworking of the proposals, parental rights may be differently reflected, but that detail is yet to be developed and can only be considered following consideration of the responses to the consultation.” — [*Official Report, Vol 47, No 5, p242, col 1*].

That means that, at this point, the Minister cannot give any assurances to parents about their future statutory rights.

Ms S Ramsey: Will Ms Lo give way briefly?

Ms Lo: Yes.

Ms S Ramsey: The answer to Mr Bradley is that a consultation is in progress, and the Minister is listening to what people are saying.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: That would be a first.

Ms S Ramsey: The Minister is always listening; not to you.

Ms Lo: I concur with what Mr Bradley said. The proposals would be a step backwards. If they are implemented, the resultant changes may lead to a loss of enforceable legal rights for children with special educational needs, which means that there will not be the same accountability to parents.

Co-ordinated support plans will be available for children who have complex needs, but there is no definition of complex needs in the policy document. We need clarity on that. We are also concerned about the funding programme that will have to be put in place to achieve the aims outlined in the proposals. We will need to see a more in-depth outline of the funding arrangements.

Long delays in assessment are unacceptable and potentially disastrous to the development of children. Such delays in development can lead to young people becoming NEETs — not in education, employment or

training. The Department for Employment and Learning was talking about NEETs fairly recently.

We would welcome any effective reform, such as the removal of the prohibition on school nursing staff informing educational psychologists of a child's needs. We would also welcome the removal of the policy that no referrals for assessment should be made until after year 2. So often, one can see the effects of delayed development in children from a very young age. We urge the Minister to listen to the consultation, to parents and to communities.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Lo: Children and parents need to be at the centre of the reforms. Parents know their children best and have practical experience in the process, so we urge the Minister to listen to them.

Mr McCallister: I thank my colleagues for securing such an important debate. As Mr Bradley said in his opening remarks, the debate about special educational needs has led to one of the largest responses that most of us have ever witnessed, even on a constituency basis. The debate has also led to a recognition of the widespread concern that there is about the policy.

I welcome the extension of the consultation period. It has been useful and has allowed us to gather the views of parents, teachers and the representative groups, because we must get this right. There is a worry that the proposals will not adequately assist parents, teachers or experts to deliver for children with special needs or ensure that all children develop their capabilities.

The Ulster Unionist Party appreciates that this is a high-level policy. The Lamb inquiry into special educational needs, which was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, was published last month. It states that, in order to achieve success, we need to listen to parents more and to bring them into meaningful partnership with statutory bodies. This policy does not put parents at the heart of special needs support, does not facilitate adequate partnerships and does not include the detail required to give parents, teachers and professionals the confidence that they need.

I hope that the Minister and her departmental officials listen to the voices of the countless parents who have responded to the consultation; they are best placed to know the needs of their children and the difficulties that they face.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Given that one concern is the removal of statements, are we not starting from a difficult position in asking the Minister and the Department to listen? In the results of the Department's 2005 survey, 80% of parents were satisfied with the statement process, 80% thought that the final statement represented a fair and

accurate assessment, and 73% felt that the annual review was necessary. The Minister's proposals attempt to do away with those very things. She ain't listening.

Mr McCallister: I hope that the Assembly supports the cross-party motion and that the Minister not only listens to the Assembly's united call but to parents' comments during the useful event that the Committee for Education hosted last week.

I was about to mention the statementing process. Colleagues, including Basil McCrea and others, said that statementing secures the rights to which people are entitled and gives protection and security to parents that their child cannot be overlooked, ignored or sidelined. One of the biggest concerns about the policy is that it will remove the protection that statements offer. I mentioned the Lamb inquiry earlier and in a question to the Minister yesterday. It provides evidence of similar experience. It states:

"parents told us they value the security of a statement and the confidence it gives them to challenge the authority if provision agreed is not forthcoming. Parents were crystal clear that they wanted the letter and spirit of law adhered to and the system made to work better."

As the Chairman said in his intervention, one major problem with the policy is the security of the statement.

The policy replaces early assessment by experts with that by teachers, and the profession is concerned about the limited detail on how teachers will gain the expertise that is required to make the correct decision. There is widespread scepticism about teachers' ability to do so for children who suffer from conditions that are difficult to diagnose, such as autistic spectrum disorder. That raises questions about the lead-in period. I also have concerns about proposals whereby schools must go through a largely internal process that will, in effect, have to fail before children receive a co-ordinated support plan. What will happen to children's rights during that period?

All those questions have to be answered. It should be noted that, when similar arrangements were introduced in Scotland, compared with statements the number of support plans fell considerably. That also causes anxiety for parents and teachers.

Given that some of the relevant legislation has not been put before the House, questions must also be asked about the ESA's structures and how they will be dealt with.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McCallister: Perhaps the Minister will give us a timeline shortly.

Mrs M Bradley: The motion gives me a sense of déjà vu, as it seems that nearly every day my constituency office takes complaints about the issue of special educational needs. Parents, teachers and principals alike

are frustrated, to say the least. The lack of security in education provision per se is the catalyst for that angst.

Parents of pupils with special educational needs have to fight constantly to get the right educational pathway for their children. Parents of children who need the nurturing environment of a special school have an entirely different fight on their hands in securing proper care services during the school day.

In essence, although there are many issues surrounding the special educational needs of any child, regardless of their creed or community, I am extremely keen to point out the main issues that are frequently brought to my attention in my constituency. They can all be brought under the broad headings of resources, early intervention and tardy departmental responses that contribute to the slow — if not snail-like — pace at which schools can respond to the requirements of a child with special educational needs. Statementing is a huge issue, and the consultation document clarifies the situation in which children who are already in possession of a statement are not guaranteed a co-ordinated support plan. Furthermore, the protection of rights that statementing offers children will no longer be beneficial to them.

In numerous debates on children's issues and education in the House, we have quoted the findings of Professor Heckmann, who contended that it is only sensible and economically beneficial to invest in early intervention and diagnosis. In order to do that, there is a clear need for the ring-fencing of delegated funding. Although learning support co-ordinators should be qualified to carry out low-level diagnostic testing, it is vital that such testing is not used as a substitute for the external high-level testing and diagnosis that currently form the basis for statementing.

In short, we have a bad situation that is threatening to fester into a huge fireball that will incinerate the rights and requirements of pupils with special educational needs. Although finance is a problem in the current economic climate, it is not the only problem. The state of the education system and the anxieties of parents, pupils and teachers have all aided and abetted the current state of special educational needs services.

We must ensure that the ring-fencing of budgets, the appropriate allocation of resources and the protection of children's rights always remain at the heart of education, especially for special needs provision. In keeping with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, we must deliver all those things to create a holistic approach to all the educational needs of children in Northern Ireland.

Parents of children with special educational needs should not have to worry every day about whether they are going to get services for their children. I appeal to the Minister to listen and to respond soon to what parents

are saying so that they, their children and the teachers can have some peace of mind. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I now call the Minister of Education. As we must move to Question Time at 3.00 pm, I will set her a little assignment: when the clock reaches 3.00 pm, she must bring her remarks to a close.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): I will be like Cinderella. Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis seo chun freagra a thabhairt ar an rún seo. Ba mhaith liom a dhearbhu go soiléir go ndéanfar breithniú iomlán ar thuairimí na bhfreagróirí don chomhairliúchán poiblí atá á dhéanam maidir leis na moltaí a tháinig ón athbhreithniú ar riachtanais speisialta oideachais agus chuimsiú nuair a bheas deireadh leis an tréimhse chomhairliúcháin i gceann cúpla lá.

I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion. I want to provide an assurance that the views of respondents to the current public consultation on the proposals emanating from the review of special educational needs and inclusion will be fully considered following the end of the consultation period in a few days' time.

2.45 pm

I welcome the fact that this is an all-party motion, and I welcome the tone of the considered debate, particularly the contributions from Basil McCrea, Anna Lo and my friend John McCallister. We had the usual ranting from other Members, but that is par for the course and, I suppose, to be expected.

The framework proposed in my consultation document puts the child or young person firmly at the centre of education provision and allows for their views and those of their parents to be heard and valued. I am committed to improving outcomes for all children. The proposals recognise the fact that more than 60,000 children, which is over 18% of the school population, have some form of special educational need, and just over 13,000 children, or 4.1% of the school population, have statements of special educational need.

The review of special educational needs and inclusion aims to strengthen the current provision for children with SEN and address the growing diversity of need in our schools. Almost 70% of children with statements of special educational need now attend mainstream schools. It is clear from the review that improvements are needed so that the education system as a whole ensures that those children and young people — future adults — are best equipped to deal with education, life and work.

Raising standards for all children and young people is at the heart of the Department's policies. I have continually supported the belief that early identification

and appropriate support interventions enable children to develop educationally alongside their classmates. That means that help is available as early as possible for those who need long-term support, thus reducing the risk of longer-term underachievement and disadvantage. Therefore, the proposals in the 'Every School a Good School: The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion' consultation document aim to put in place a more robust and accountable support framework that identifies and supports the needs of all children, whenever they occur and as early as possible. It is, therefore, vital that school principals, teachers and other staff in schools are given the skills, confidence and support to meet the challenges presented by the diversity of need that they experience every day in the classroom.

Chuipe sin, tá £25 milliún faighte agam, sa bhreis ar an £202 milliún a chaitheann mo Roinn cheana féin ar pháistí a bhfuil riachtanais speisialta acu, chun tús a chur le cur i bhfeidhm cláir chuimsithgh oiliúna agus forbartha acmhainní do cheannairí scoile, do mhúinteoirí agus do bhaill foirne eile in earnálacha na scoileanna agus na réamhscoile.

To that end, I have secured £25 million over and above the £202 million that my Department already spends on children with special needs to begin the implementation of a comprehensive training and capacity — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister will take her seat. Will Members please allow the Minister to make her speech? It is important that, from the Chair, I hear every word that is spoken. Therefore, I once again ask the usual offenders not to persist. Thank you. Go ahead, Minister.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The proposed workforce development programmes will increase the expertise in our schools and ensure that the focus for school leaders, teachers and other staff is firmly on the early identification of need and is closely followed by appropriate in-school intervention and easy access to external support as necessary.

Currently, mainstream schools require access to external supports for approximately 35% of special educational needs children in their care. The proposals aim to enable schools to meet the educational needs of more mainstream children from their own resources, and I firmly believe that that can be achieved through a dedicated capacity-building and development programme. That increased expertise in schools is expected to reduce the current over-reliance on external assessment and assistance to support children who face barriers to learning and diminish the need for acquisition of a statement and the associated delays and bureaucracy. That is not to say that the proposals

aim to reduce or remove external supports for every child who needs them. My wish is that parents and children feel confident that the system is there to help and support them, and that education, health, social care and other professionals work in partnership to deliver effective support.

The consultation proposals are necessarily at a high level at this stage. The existing SEN framework is complex, and, if improvements are to be made, I need to understand how the public view the high-level proposals before I can develop detailed policy proposals or legislative change. I assure parents that I will carefully consider their consultation responses and that no changes can be made to the current statutory framework without detailed proposals that will also be subject to consultation.

I firmly believe that we should have a fully inclusive society with equality at its core. I also recognise the wishes of children and parents in choosing their educational setting. I know that many parents feel that a mainstream education maximises their child's educational experience. However, I also know that many parents and children value highly our special schools sector. Therefore, the proposals are not intended to change the current mix of mainstream and special provision here.

The proposals are not intended to diminish the rights of children with special needs or their parents. I must carefully consider options for improvement to the current statutory powers and duties associated with every organisation that provides for those children. I particularly welcome the views of all those with an interest in rights-based issues on how I can strike a fair balance of responsibility between schools and statutory agencies.

The proposals also recognise the need for greater collaboration and co-operation among agencies in order to achieve fully the aims that have been set. The way in which all relevant sectors and agencies work together to achieve timely educational assessment, diagnosis and intervention must improve. My colleague Sue Ramsey made a particularly important point about the need for the health and education sectors to work together closely.

The Department of Education and the five education and library boards spent £202 million supporting special needs provision in 2008-09. I want to ensure that that significant resource is used as effectively as possible. I will carefully consider the views of respondents to the consultation to ensure that our children derive the maximum benefit from all available funding to support their needs.

After the public consultation period ends, the Department's immediate work programme will be to consider and analyse the responses received and to

compile and publish a summary response document. A thorough analysis of those responses will guide and inform the development of the detailed policy proposals for implementation, including financial and operational considerations.

Work is under way on the development of a school capacity-building programme, which will begin to be rolled out during the 2010-11 school year. That sits well within the current statutory framework.

D'iarr mé ar an gCigireacht Oideachais agus Oiliúna treoir do chomhordaitheoirí riachtanais speisialta oideachais agus táscairí dea-chleachtais do scoileanna a fhorbairt. .

I have asked the Education and Training Inspectorate to develop guidance for special educational needs co-ordinators and to identify indicators of good practice for schools. The proposals provide the basis for a robust and detailed consideration of the future shape of an inclusive special educational needs framework. That will be informed by the wealth of views and ideas that I expect to see in the varied cross-section of responses to the proposals.

The proposals are some of the most important that are being considered in the House. It is important that we ensure that children and their rights and needs are at the heart of our decision-making. I do that in every single policy that I propose.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 3.00 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Alastair Ross.

The debate stood suspended.

3.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 1 has been withdrawn.

Ministerial Responsibilities

2. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps she and her officials are taking to ensure that her new responsibilities as Acting First Minister will not impact on her role in dealing with the recession. (AQO 649/10)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I have confirmed with my officials that, as far as my Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) responsibilities are concerned, it is business as usual.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Yesterday, for example, I delivered an oral statement on the independent review of economic development (IREP). I am taking DETI oral questions today, and, later this evening, I will meet the Invest Northern Ireland board. In addition, I will continue to carry out a wide range of engagements and meetings that are related to my DETI portfolio.

Mrs D Kelly: I am sure that the men will not regard me as being sexist, but I know that all women carry out multitasking roles, usually quite well, and the Minister is also a young mother. Two weeks have already elapsed since her party leader vacated the position of First Minister, so there are four weeks left in the six-week time frame that he gave himself. What long-term plans are in place in case he is unable to return as First Minister?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It may well be the case that he will be back as First Minister this week, next week, or the following week. Whenever he comes back, I will be quite happy to hand back the reins of Acting First Minister to the substantive First Minister. The substance of the Member's question was about what I had done in relation to my portfolio. I hope that she recognises that the work of DETI continues. I note that she was not in the House yesterday when I made the independent review of economic policy statement in relation to economic policy. That was a very fundamental statement looking forward. I hope that she has the chance to look at that statement and the consequences

for the economy because it gives us a blueprint for moving forward.

Mr K Robinson: I was very reassured by what the Minister said in regard to her position here today. I am delighted to see her here in her role as the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, when I saw Mr Jim Wells arriving in the Chamber, given his previous record of being the last Member to speak in an Assembly, I began to get worried. *[Laughter.]* I am watching him very closely.

The recession and the challenging economic conditions are of paramount importance to us all. They demand maximum attention at this time. Some ambitious targets have been set in the Programme for Government. Will the Minister assure the House today that those targets can be attained? Will she indicate the current position regarding the targets?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Programme for Government set some quite challenging targets for me and for other Departments. As I stated in the House last week, the public service agreements (PSAs) that were set in respect of productivity and employment relate not just to my Department, but to other Departments. The employment PSAs, in particular, relate to the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). It is important that we look at all those targets, which we do periodically. We check that the targets are on course. If they are not, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) sets up accountability meetings at official or ministerial level. The Member will know that one such meeting has taken place on the tourism PSA to make sure that we do all that we can to deal with the economic recession and its impact on the tourism target.

One reason why I asked the independent review to look at economic policy and the performance of Invest Northern Ireland was to make sure that we were properly equipped to meet the Programme for Government targets. As Members know, that report came back to me at the end of September 2009, after which there was a short period for consultation. We took those consultation responses together with what Professor Barnett gave us, and we have given a very reasoned response to that report. Indeed, I am sure that Members will have noted that it has been welcomed by a wide range of business interests, including the Institute of Directors and the Confederation of British Industry. We now have the blueprint for moving forward, and I very much look forward to the implementation phase of the IREP report.

Next Generation Broadband

3. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an outline of her Department's £48 million investment in the next generation

broadband project announced on 3 December 2009.
(AQO 650/10)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: On 3 December 2009, I announced, jointly with BT, the next generation broadband project, which will deliver next generation broadband services to 85% of businesses across Northern Ireland by 2011.

That £48 million project is supported by government funding of £18 million from the European regional development fund's sustainable competitiveness programme, the European agricultural fund's rural development programme and matched funding from the Executive.

Mr Gallagher: I have a question for the Minister on behalf of the 15% of people she referred to who have never had first generation broadband, some of whom are in the constituency that we both represent. Since the Minister announced the initiative, some people in that situation have contacted BT, only to be told that they will not share in next generation broadband either. Does the Minister share BT's view? Does she hold out any hope for that group of people?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

In relation to the first contract referred to by the Member, which was granted to BT, I simply do not accept that very many people have been unable to avail themselves of that project. Broadband services are accessible and available to around 99% of the people of Northern Ireland through cable or satellite provision. That is how, although some areas simply cannot be reached by fibre, we have been able to provide 99% availability.

The rationale behind the Programme for Government target to reach 85% of businesses is that that was the figure at which it was deemed value for money to provide broadband for businesses. However, first indications from BT suggest that the initial target of 85% will be exceeded and that next generation services will be available to around 95% of our businesses by 2011.

I know that the Member is sceptical about broadband services, particularly in Fermanagh and south Tyrone, but I hope that he recognises that we have been proactive in improving broadband services, particularly in the west of Northern Ireland. I refer him to remote broadband services and to the Northern Ireland broadband fund, which can be availed of by people in Ballinamallard, in his constituency.

H2O Ireland's innovative use of the waste water disposal infrastructure to run an optical fibre network around Enniskillen is the most recent of other developments. That will be a great improvement. The local council has supported the bid for that project and invested a lot of money in it. Mr Gallagher may be sceptical about the provision of broadband in Fermanagh and south Tyrone, but we are doing everything in our

power to help people in that area, and everywhere else in Northern Ireland, to get access to broadband.

Mr Campbell: I welcome the announcement made by the Minister last month at the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Will she outline some benefits for groups in rural areas and farming communities, where many people's business acumen and expertise totally depend on broadband access? After the next generation initiative is implemented, how will those people's situation differ from that of 12 months ago?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The project's funding is skewed towards rural areas. That is one reason why the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development wanted to be associated with the BT announcement. Rural areas have been allocated £12 million of government money, and urban areas have been allocated £6 million. That is hugely important. Mr Gallagher, who asked the substantive question, must give cognisance to the fact that we have skewed that money for a reason. As Mr Campbell said, we recognise that many businesses in rural areas need access to broadband because it is their only portal to the Internet and, consequently, to a wider market for their services. So, it is important that we skew that money. I am delighted that we have been able to do so, because I think that we will see real benefits from it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Tourism: Initiatives/New Opportunities

5. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how the Northern Ireland Tourist Board develops tourism initiatives and identifies new opportunities, as opposed to reacting to initiatives generated by councils and other bodies. (AQO 652/10)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) is responsible for product development and for marketing Northern Ireland at home and in the Republic of Ireland. It carries out extensive research and gathers market intelligence to identify the evolving demands and interests of today's visitors. That evidence provides the basis for developing strategic and operational plans for both the tourism sector and the board, which proactively identifies product development and marketing priorities.

A new tourism strategy for Northern Ireland will shortly go out to public consultation. The strategy will identify future opportunities and provide a clear and inspiring vision for developing the tourism experience through to 2020. In addition, in the past two years, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board has proactively engaged almost 1,000 people from across the tourism sector in an effort to discover all that is unique about

Northern Ireland. Subsequently, NITB implemented a series of pilot projects to highlight ways in which the tourism industry and its stakeholders can improve the experience of visitors to Northern Ireland.

Mr McCallister: Has the Northern Ireland Tourist Board considered the possibility of a measure to attract European visitors who are interested in the Pilgrim's Trail, which is a major Christian heritage initiative that traces its roots back to Canterbury?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member's colleague Mr Cree raised that matter in the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and the Tourist Board is looking into it. As the Member will be aware, the St Patrick/Christian heritage project is one of our five signature projects, and I feel that that fits in quite neatly with the topic that he mentioned. Therefore, we should look at any way in which we might promote that signature project and see whether we can use it as a mechanism to get more people to visit that part of Northern Ireland, which is very beautiful and rich in heritage and culture.

Mr P Ramsey: The Minister will be aware of the ongoing tourism work in my constituency, particularly on our own signature project. What efforts are being made by her Department to invest in the plantation period? Furthermore, does the Minister concur that it would be best to adopt a cross-departmental approach with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in order to maximise the impact and potential of that tourism product?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I wholeheartedly agree with the Member that that is something that we must take on board with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and, indeed, the Department of the Environment, which, as the Member knows, plays a key role in funding the built heritage programme, particularly in the city of Londonderry. Recently, I wrote to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to ensure that he knows the importance of continuing with the built heritage programme, which I firmly believe is part of setting the Walled City in its context. A lot of work has been carried out in the city to develop the Playhouse Theatre, St Columb's Cathedral and First Derry Presbyterian Church — projects with which the Member has been associated — and, indeed, we hope to carry out work on the Guildhall.

On the wider issue of highlighting the plantation period, I have asked the Tourist Board to look at 2012 as a key year for tourism in Northern Ireland. In particular, there will be the Titanic celebration, and we very much hope that, by then, the Giant's Causeway visitor centre will be up and running. Highlighting the plantation period could contribute to making 2012 a key

year, because it would help with marketing not just in our key market, Great Britain, but wider afield in Europe.

Ms Lo: I welcome the Minister's announcement of a tourism strategy. Does she agree that we have not been ambitious enough in promoting and developing tourism in Northern Ireland? We have many beautiful lakes and mountains that we have not promoted properly. I have relatives who live in the Lake District, and I often go there in August. If one has not booked several months in advance, one cannot get a room there.

3.15 pm

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Part of the beauty of Northern Ireland is that we do not have to cope with the overabundance of people who visit the Lake District. I was there last year and saw the amount of visitors who came to that area. However, I think that we are moving ahead, and there is a sea change in the way in which people view the tourism industry in Northern Ireland. That is very important, because I have often said that the tourism industry could be one of our key drivers, along with the food industry. I say that because a lot of people have not visited Northern Ireland before, for obvious reasons. Therefore, there is an opportunity to get those people to come to Northern Ireland and to view the beauty that the Member talked about.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board is about to engage in its new integrated marketing campaign, which will run here and in the Republic of Ireland. The Tourist Board's most recent piece of work was its summer campaign, and it shows that, for an investment of £820,000, an estimated £10.6 million was generated to the local economy. That is a fabulous payback for the amount of money that was put into that marketing campaign, and I congratulate the Tourist Board for that work. However, I accept that there is a lot more to be done, particularly if we want to hit the Programme for Government targets in relation to tourism. They are very stretching in numbers and in tourism spend, but we are committed to hitting those targets, and I will continue to work with the Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland to try to hit those targets.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the fact that the Minister acknowledges that the plantation did actually take place. Will she update us on what her Department is doing to promote local tourism projects?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am not going to get into a historical debate with the Member. I am sure that he does not want to talk about the Cruithin and the Gaels today, but I am not going to deny that the plantation took place. We brought a great deal to Northern Ireland and, at that time, to Ireland. Nevertheless, part of the new tourism strategy is about

the way in which we can work with local tourism providers. An awful lot of time has been spent with local industry and local stakeholders, such as local tourism, and I am thinking of the way in which Fermanagh Lakeland Tourism, in my constituency, is working with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board much more proactively. Local tourism really adds to what we have to offer. We have signature projects, which are hugely important for getting people into Northern Ireland. However, part of what the Tourist Board is trying to do is to discover people's stories and experiences when they come to Northern Ireland. That gives us added value in our tourism product.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Tourism: Belfast Visitor Numbers

7. **Lord Browne** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action her Department is taking to increase the number of tourists from Great Britain visiting Belfast. (AQO 654/10)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The importance of the Great Britain market for Northern Ireland tourism cannot be understated. Responsibility for marketing Northern Ireland in GB lies with Tourism Ireland, which has set challenging targets of growing the total number of promotable visitors to Northern Ireland by more than 10%. The global economic downturn has resulted in a sharp drop in visitor numbers from GB, and Tourism Ireland has undertaken a detailed review of the GB market to identify ways to stop that decline and to return the key market to growth. The review resulted in a 10-point action plan that is designed to stabilise the market and to promote recovery. It will be presented to the industry at a Know Britain — Grow Britain event in Belfast on 28 January 2010.

Lord Browne: I thank the Minister for her answer. The Minister will be aware that Belfast City Council has recently completed an integrated strategic framework for tourism in Belfast, which identified a number of capital infrastructure projects that need to be undertaken to increase tourism, particularly in Belfast. In light of that, does her Department have any plans in relation to the construction of services, such as hotels or restaurants, particularly with reference to the Titanic signature project in Belfast?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member will know that Belfast has increased the number of beds that are available to visitors and tourists alike when they visit. Indeed, I have been at the opening of some new hotels over the past year.

As part of the Titanic signature project, a Premier Inn is due to open in autumn 2010. In addition, it is

planned that Harland and Wolff's drawing offices will be developed into a boutique hotel. That will add to the contemporary accommodation portfolio of the Titanic Quarter and, indeed, of Belfast. I understand that further hotels are to be situated in the Titanic Quarter.

As the Member will be aware, when the iconic Titanic signature project building is up and running, it will house several coffee shops and restaurants as well as conference and banqueting facilities. Therefore, great plans, which are inspiring and innovative, are afoot not only for the Titanic signature project but for the rest of Belfast.

I pay tribute to the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau and its work with Belfast City Council, and I commend its tireless drive to establish Belfast as the gateway to Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call Conall McDevitt, I ask Members to be a little quieter and to allow the Minister to be heard.

Mr McDevitt: I welcome the Minister's commitment to tourism. I know from a previous life that she genuinely cares about it. Will she confirm press reports that £1 million savings have been sought from Tourism Ireland's budget for the coming year? Will she assure the House and the industry that that will in no way affect the marketing of the region in Great Britain, which is, of course, Tourism Ireland's responsibility?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I absolutely give the Member that assurance. Indeed, I have had many conversations with Tourism Ireland's chief executive on how he will increase marketing. He has indicated how he will do that through his strategy Know Britain — Grow Britain, which will be launched on 28 January 2010.

The savings that have been taken from Tourism Ireland have not only been taken by my Department but by the relevant Department in the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, it is not the case that my Department alone has taken efficiency savings from Tourism Ireland: those savings have been taken by my counterpart in the Republic. It is the same for other, if you like, cross-border bodies.

We have done so because the coming budgetary period will be difficult. We have spoken to the chief executive and board members and asked them to make efficiency savings; they have come up to the mark and made those savings. However, just because they have made those savings does not mean that Tourism Ireland will be any less able to deliver. It is not always simply about money; it is about using resources in the most appropriate way. I believe that Tourism Ireland's chief executive will do just that.

Sir Allen McClay

8. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the contribution made by the late Sir Allen McClay to the economy. (AQO 655/10)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Sir Allen McClay was an outstanding entrepreneur. His personal vision and dedication to the life-sciences sector made an enormous contribution to economic development in Northern Ireland. He also contributed to wider economic development in Northern Ireland through his membership of the group that was established to work with the US economic envoy, Declan Kelly, to attract investment and to support local companies' export ambitions.

Lest we forget, Sir Allen provided significant personal funding to support healthcare research and its commercial exploitation. He also donated £20 million for the benefit of chemistry education at Queen's University to further expand scientific discovery.

Mr Wells: Needless to say, I agree with every word that the Minister said about that remarkable individual. Does she agree that people who can succeed Allen McClay and carry on his good work must be identified, nurtured and promoted? Does she agree with the message that many more people like Allen McClay are needed?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I could not agree more. However, I believe that Sir Allen McClay was a unique individual. I am told that he treated the companies of Almac and, previously, Galen as his extended family. Although he was a man of great wealth and, indeed, a knight of the realm, he was known to everyone at Almac simply as Allen.

He was a humble man to whom we should all look up, not only for his personal attributes, but because, as the Member said, he was a great entrepreneur for Northern Ireland. He stood out. We were all greatly saddened by his death in America some weeks ago.

I want to pay a personal tribute to Sir Allen McClay. During the working group meeting with the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and the US economic envoy, Declan Kelly, Sir Allen spoke out in his frank way. I appreciated his frankness. When other people talked in florid terms, Sir Allen could be direct, and that was appreciated by those of us from Northern Ireland. He was intelligent, he was a man whom we should all look up to, and he will be sorely missed.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her words; my party agrees with her sentiments. What initiatives or encouragement can the Assembly, or will the Minister, put in place to encourage more businessmen like Sir Allen McClay to get involved with us and share their expertise?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Sir Allen was a great believer in research and development. On the occasions that I visited Almac, it was usually in relation to an announcement on research and development and innovation. He supported the work that we are doing in relation to the MATRIX panel, which looks at the next big things for the Northern Ireland economy and considers what we should be moving forward with. It examines how innovation, research and development can be exploited and made into an industry in Northern Ireland.

I hope that the work of the MATRIX panel and the work that we are doing in research and development in industry in Northern Ireland will stand as a tribute to Sir Allen and to all those people who see research and development as the way in which we need to make a step change for the Northern Ireland economy.

Energy Efficiency: ERDF

9. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions her Department has had in relation to the proposals to use the European regional development fund for energy efficiency in housing. (AQO 656/10)

Mr F McCann: Mr Deputy Speaker, I apologise to you and to the Minister for being late for Question Time.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department for Social Development (DSD) is responsible for domestic energy-efficiency improvements. I can confirm that my Department had discussions with DSD following the European Commission's April 2009 decision to allow European regional development funding to be used for energy efficiency in housing. However, given that DETI's European regional development fund's competitiveness programme commenced in 2007, all funding has been designated to, or earmarked for, other priorities that have been agreed by the Executive. That includes £25 million for renewable energy, energy efficiency and energy management. The programme is due to run until 2013, and my officials will continue to keep the uptake of funding under review to ensure that it is optimised.

Mr F McCann: I thank the Minister for her response. Does the Minister agree that we need to tap into Europe if we are to promote energy efficiency in housing and eco-friendly houses, especially in these times of severe financial restrictions?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In April 2009, when the announcement was made, my officials met DSD officials to see whether there was any way in which we could release any of that funding. That funding is all earmarked, but I have asked officials to make sure that if any money is, by some chance, not used, it is released, because I

accept that there is a need to look at the Housing Executive's request for use of that money. However, the funding is, unfortunately, earmarked, but we will keep it under review.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister outline the assessment that has been made for the environmental and renewable energy fund to promote renewable energy in homes and state whether she plans to implement any follow-up programmes?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As the Member will know, my primary objective as the DETI Minister is not in relation to fuel efficiency in homes; that is a matter for his party colleague the Minister for Social Development. As the economy Minister, my primary focus is on business competitiveness and on ways of using energy efficiency to help businesses that have, unfortunately, received large fuel bills and that need all the help that they can get with those bills. However, we will continue to work with the Minister for Social Development on other energy-related matters, such as fuel poverty, on which the Department for Social Development has lead responsibility.

3.30 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Special Educational Needs

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly acknowledges the anxiety amongst parents and teachers of children with special educational needs regarding the future policy outlined in 'Every School a Good School — the Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion'; and calls on the Minister of Education to ensure that the policy brings clarity around the use of the term "inclusion", no diminution of the present statutory rights of children with special educational needs, early expert diagnosis and effective intervention, a fair balance of responsibility between schools and statutory agencies, and ring-fencing of resources to ensure that children with special educational needs benefit from delegated funding. — [*Mr D Bradley*.]

Mr Ross: I thank the Members who participated in the debate. As many of them pointed out, all the major parties are signatories to the motion. At a time when the media is dominated by arguments among political parties, it gives some hope to the people out there that the Assembly can get on with the job of delivering on important issues.

In his contribution, Basil McCrea asked what the Assembly can do. Devolution is important because the Assembly can have a local response to issues that concern local people. I have received more e-mails, letters and telephone calls on this issue than almost any other issue, perhaps with the exception of the debate some time ago on care homes in east Antrim. Special educational needs tops the list of issues about which the public are concerned. It is certainly not the devolution of policing and justice powers or anything else. All Members, whether they sit on the Committee for Education or not, will have had similar experiences.

The Committee Chairman talked about the number of groups with which the Committee has engaged. Over several weeks, various groups came in and talked about their concerns. Other Members talked about the event that the Committee hosted in the Great Hall last Wednesday night, and all Committee members were there for at least some part of the event. Numerous groups, including parents, teachers, lobby groups and charities, were given the opportunity to raise issues of concern. Special educational needs is a massive issue, and we have heard about the increasing number of children who are affected and who are being diagnosed with having special educational needs.

We all agree that early identification is important, but we all have concerns, and Members from all parties expressed those concerns today. We have heard of the experiences and concerns of parents, who know their children better than anyone else and who are

concerned about anything that damages their children's future prospects. However, we also heard about teachers' concerns. I spoke to a young lady today who is training to be a teacher. She attended the event last Wednesday night and asked what training will be available for new teachers. The point was made to officials who attended that meeting that awareness was not enough. It is not enough for a teacher to be aware that a child has special educational needs. Adequate training is required. However, what sort of training will be available? Half a day's training on how to deal with children with special educational needs is not enough, and that came out during the debate.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:

The Minister makes much play of the fact that £25 million was secured as additional funding. The problem is that when that funding is spent in one year, what happens in the following years, year on year? Someone has to pick up the bill and pay for the additional training, which is a must in order to be able to provide the service.

Mr Ross: That is absolutely right. Other Members spoke about the importance of having ring-fenced funding for that specific issue. That leads me on to the point that although several Members raised concerns and asked questions, the Minister did not deal with them. It is disappointing that Members from all parties raised points that the Minister did not adequately address.

We have not heard anything radically new from Members today because the issue has been around for some time. However, it is important that Members are able to express concerns that people have passed on to them, and I will speak briefly on Members' contributions.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education, Dominic Bradley, opened the debate with a comprehensive speech on three issues that are causing concern: early identification and intervention; co-ordinated support plans; and resources. Other Members also referred to those issues. I, along with other Committee members, attended some of the workshops, at which I was able to speak to people who had concerns. Mr Bradley mentioned specifically the timing of the interventions and how a year could be wasted by the proposals' hit-and-miss approach. He talked about the importance of expert diagnosis and the legal implications for some teachers. Again, that goes back to what I said earlier about the concerns that many teachers have about the impact that the proposals will have on them and how they are nervous about their role.

He also pointed to the fact that teachers may be able to identify a child with autism, but may not necessarily be able to point specifically to where that child is on the autism spectrum, and that issue also concerns many teachers. Mr Bradley, and a number of other Members, also raised the issue that children who currently have

statements may not have that protection after reviews have been carried out. Indeed, all Members are greatly concerned that moving away from the process of statementing could dilute a child's legal rights.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education, Mervyn Storey, spoke about the lack of detail contained in the proposals and how that has led to concern among professionals. He also spoke about how it is becoming more difficult for children with special needs to be assessed, and he expressed concern that the proposals could make it even more so. Mr Storey also pointed to the need for a focus to be placed on special schools, specifically on overcrowding, underfunding, and the number of cover days required because of teacher absence. Disappointingly, however, the Minister did not adequately deal with those issues in her response.

Sue Ramsey, who raised several issues, has not simply walked out of the Chamber; she is currently appearing on 'Stormont Live.' During her contribution, she made the point that Sinn Féin is supportive of the motion, which is encouraging, and welcomed the two extensions to the consultation process. She also spoke about how important it is for the Assembly to look after the most vulnerable children in our society and said that many Members who are or have been involved in local government are aware of the special education issue. As a single-jobber, and perhaps in a few hours a no-jobber, I am also acutely aware of the concerns and difficulties facing many parents across the country.

Ms Ramsey also talked about the definition of inclusion and said that children with barriers to learning require assistance. That is correct, and we must recognise that certain children face barriers. However, there would not be agreement throughout the Chamber on a definition of inclusion or on whether those who face barriers necessarily have special educational needs. Ms Ramsey specifically highlighted Traveller children as having special educational needs. Although those children may face barriers to learning, I am not sure whether including them with other children with special educational needs would find support across the community.

Anna Lo, however, agreed with Ms Ramsey on that point, and she added that ethnic minorities also face barriers and that they should also be included in the definition of inclusion. She went on to say that the Alliance Party broadly welcomed the proposals, but, after an intervention from Dominic Bradley in which he pointed out that the proposals contained no guarantee of parents' rights, Ms Lo became a little more lukewarm towards them and said that they were, perhaps, a backward step.

Basil McCrea spoke about the grave concerns and anxiety that teachers, parents and lobby groups have about the proposals. He adopted a conciliatory tone

during his contribution, and, on the issue of inclusion, said that it was important to have a balance. He went on to say that the current statementing procedures are unsatisfactory and he wondered how they could be improved. Mr McCrea stated that the procedures must be improved and that we must ensure that a retrograde step is not taken. He also talked about the importance of ring-fencing funding for special educational needs, which was a point that the Chairperson of the Committee for Education also made during his intervention a short time ago.

John McCallister spoke about the widespread concern about this high-level policy. He also highlighted the concerns about moving away from statementing, which, as the Chairperson of the Committee pointed out, is a process with which the vast majority of parents were happy when last surveyed. Indeed, if 80% of parents are happy with the current process, yet the Department wants to move away from it, the House must be concerned. Mr McCallister also pointed out that when similar arrangements were introduced in Scotland, the number of people with support plans fell. We must bear that in mind.

Mary Bradley spoke about resources and early intervention. She also said that there should be no substitute for an expert diagnosis of children with special needs.

I do not have much time left, but in response to the debate, the Minister assured the House that she was listening. If the Assembly still exists and her party remains committed to making devolution work, I suppose that the test of her words will come in future weeks and months. It is then that we will see whether she has listened to the Assembly's proposals and taken the action that Members and, more importantly, those outside the Chamber want to see. I commend the motion to the House, and I am glad that all parties in the House have been able to support it.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges the anxiety amongst parents and teachers of children with special educational needs regarding the future policy outlined in 'Every School a Good School — the Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion'; and calls on the Minister of Education to ensure that the policy brings clarity around the use of the term "inclusion", no diminution of the present statutory rights of children with special educational needs, early expert diagnosis and effective intervention, a fair balance of responsibility between schools and statutory agencies, and ring-fencing of resources to ensure that children with special educational needs benefit from delegated funding.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker.*]

ADJOURNMENT

West Belfast Tourism Podcast Initiative

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member is not in his place to speak to the Adjournment topic.

Adjourned at 3.40 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 1 February 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: The Acting First Minister and deputy First Minister wrote to me this morning to advise me that, due to exceptional circumstances, they will be unavailable to appear at Question Time as scheduled today. Members will know that Question Time to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) was scheduled to take place at 2.30 pm, followed by questions to the Minister of the Environment at 3.00 pm. Following discussions this morning with the Whips, it has been agreed that, when the Business Committee meets tomorrow, it will reschedule for next week the questions that were due to be answered by OFMDFM today. Question Time for the Minister of the Environment will be brought forward to begin at 2.30 pm today. Given the circumstances, I ask the House for its understanding.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: This morning, I received notification of the resignation, with immediate effect, of Mr Thomas Buchanan as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Work and Families (Increase of Maximum Amount) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I beg to move

That the Work and Families (Increase of Maximum Amount) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

I am seeking the Assembly's approval of this Order, which is subject to the confirmatory procedure as laid down in the parent legislation, the Work and Families (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. It was made on 10 September 2009 and came into effect on 1 October 2009.

It will be helpful if I outline to Members the background to the Order. First, however, I note the resignation of Mr Buchanan as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning and thank him for his co-operation in the short period that he has occupied that post.

In the 2009 Budget, the UK Government announced that they would increase from £350 to £380 the limit on the maximum amount of a week's pay used to calculate certain awards made by employment-related tribunals, including awards for redundancy or unfair dismissal, and other amounts payable under employment legislation by government — in this case, the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland — where an employer is insolvent. Northern Ireland has traditionally maintained parity with Great Britain in this area, and arrangements remain in place to ensure that payments in Northern Ireland keep pace with those in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The Northern Ireland primary legislation is framed in the same way as that in Great Britain, with the annual increase in the weekly limit generally being linked to the retail price index (RPI). However, on this occasion, in both Great Britain and Northern Ireland, a one-off power is being used to raise the weekly limit by an amount greater than the rate of the RPI and, as a consequence, to suspend the annual RPI-linked change that would otherwise have been required. If this suspension had not taken place, the effect of that annual change would have been to reduce the weekly limit from £350 to £340 due to the fall in the RPI.

Unfortunately, the current economic downturn has generated an exceptionally high level of redundancies, which has convinced me of the need to revise the basic entitlements of individuals who are facing the dreadful reality of losing their jobs. Inaction would result in redundancy payments being reduced at a time of considerable hardship. I am, therefore, seeking Members' agreement to this measure today to provide much needed entitlements in line with the rest of the United Kingdom.

The uprating from £350 to £380 was implemented across the UK on 1 October 2009. As the amount is used to calculate various payments and awards, including unfair dismissal awards and payments made to employees where their employer has become insolvent as well as statutory redundancy payments, this is a positive measure at a time of undoubted economic hardship. It ensures that people in Northern Ireland continue to have the same entitlements as their counterparts in England, Wales and Scotland.

An equality screening exercise has been carried out and has concluded that there are no differential impacts on section 75 groups. A regulatory impact assessment has ascertained that there are costs to employers in the region of £1.9 million to £2.7 million, with Exchequer costs of between £800,000 and £1.3 million. I emphasise, however, that, for the economy as a whole, those financial impacts, with the exception of one-off implementation costs of around £60,000, are offset by benefits to employees. Although there are associated costs for employers, I have looked and will continue to look for opportunities to reduce the regulatory burden on business in line with the principles of better regulation. My Department is considering deregulatory measures relating to employment agencies that would reduce the administrative burden experienced by employers. A fundamental review of mechanisms for resolving workplace disputes has just been completed, and I hope to announce proposals shortly that will reduce costs to employers and offer a wider range of alternatives to what can be lengthy and expensive tribunal proceedings.

I return to the matter at hand. The provisions of the proposed Order are considered to be compliant with section 24 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which is entitled 'Community law, Convention rights, etc.' I am grateful to the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Examiner of Statutory Rules for scrutiny of this statutory rule. I am also grateful to the Committee for its recommendation that the Order be confirmed by the Assembly.

Mr Speaker, you will recall that last week, sadly, there were two further significant announcements, as more than 400 people lost their jobs in manufacturing. That is of great distress to them and of great regret and concern to all Members. When we are considering the proposed Order, we must remember the circumstances in which many find themselves, particularly those who will be greatly challenged to find alternative employment. It may be asked why I have decided to increase the amount when the retail price index is falling. However, in addition to the argument based on parity, I must point out that those people are in the most vulnerable situation they will ever find themselves in throughout their career. The amounts involved are comparatively modest, yet they may contribute in some measure to

alleviating the financial distress in which many of those people will find themselves.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Like the Minister, I want to commend Thomas Buchanan, the former Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning. I thank him for the help and support he gave me, as Chairperson, and I also say that on behalf of the Committee staff. I am getting a little worried: this makes three Deputy Chairpersons I have seen down during my time as Chairperson. Is it me? Should I take this personally? Keep bringing them on. Thomas is returning to the Health Committee, and, as a member of that Committee, I welcome his return.

On behalf of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I support the motion. The Minister has set out its purpose clearly, so I do not want to waste time repeating that. The Committee is conscious that the Minister has taken a sensible decision, in view of the economic downturn, to increase the weekly base for maximum payment beyond the rate indicated by the retail price index. The Committee commends the Minister for that.

The Committee considered the SL1 background note to the Order at its meeting on 9 September 2009 and agreed to support the proposed statutory rule at its meeting on 7 October 2009. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I support the motion.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for outlining the measure. I, too, welcome the Order.

As the Minister has said, the measure ensures that statutory redundancy payments and various compensations due to employees do not decline in line with inflation at this time of recession. The Minister outlined that there will be some cost to employers and some to the Department. It will be noted that, in the circumstances, both figures are modest. That money will be going directly to people who have lost their job, and it will therefore help them if they are unemployed for a period, and it will, as a result, benefit the economy.

The measure is one that I am sure the whole House will welcome. When the Committee discussed it, no problems were found. I thank the Minister for his work on the matter.

Ms Lo: I support the motion and the approval of this Order. It is important not only that we keep parity with Great Britain but that Members show support for those facing redundancy or who have just experienced it and demonstrate that the House cares about those people. It would be unthinkable to decrease the maximum

amount payable from £350 to £340. Therefore, we warmly support the increase of £30 per week.

12.15 pm

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I have attended more rigorous debates. Before you came in, Mr Speaker, I sat alone in the Chamber wondering whether we would even get a quorum.

The Committee assessed the Order in considerable detail. Under the six-month rule, we had to bring the measure to the House before April. Therefore, we decided to bring it to the House at this stage. Consequential issues will arise from awards made at tribunals as a result of the Order, and those will work themselves through the system.

As I said, given the regrettable circumstances that we face, I am sure that many workers who are facing redundancy or reaching the end of their working life will find it extremely difficult to find a job with comparable wages. Therefore, any modest assistance that can be given at this stage will help those people to get through a difficult time.

I thank the Committee and Members for their contributions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Work and Families (Increase of Maximum Amount) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Statutory Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

That Mr Thomas Buchanan be appointed as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety; that Mr Jonathan Bell be appointed as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning; and that Mr Jonathan Bell replace Mr Adrian McQuillan as a member of the Committee for the Environment. — [*Mr Weir.*]

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Education Bill

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee previously agreed to allocate additional time to motions for which two or more amendments have been selected. As two amendments have been published on the Marshalled List, the Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 45 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. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose the amendment and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McCallister: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with grave concern the failure by the Minister of Education to secure consensus on the Education Bill; further notes the unacceptable nature of the Minister's interim governance and management arrangements; believes that these interim arrangements undermine the authority of this Assembly; and calls on the Minister of Education to urgently seek a resolution that is acceptable to all parties in the Executive.

Since the introduction of the Education Bill, the Ulster Unionist Party has outlined serious reservations about its content and general direction. In light of the Minister's initial proposals, we opposed the first Education Bill at Second Stage. Early in the process, we realised that the Bill had the potential to cause deadlock and confrontation. Unfortunately, we have been proven right.

At Second Stage of the Education Bill, my colleague Mr Basil McCrea said:

"I urge all other parties to reflect seriously on the practical, democratic and inclusive ramifications that the Bill will have for our entire educational system and for our society." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 36, p10, col 2*].

I appreciate that other parties are coming to terms with how potentially disastrous the Minister's proposals are. However, I am afraid that much of the opposition has come too late. Instead of sending the Minister back to the drawing board at the earliest possible opportunity, we are now stuck in the quagmire of incompetence with an Education Bill that is bureaucratic and overly centralising. It will weaken the ability of schools to manage their own affairs and to achieve the best educational outcomes for children in Northern Ireland.

The parties have spent more than a week in talks dealing with an issue about which most people in Northern Ireland are not overly concerned. However, our education system is on the brink of collapse. People in the streets are confused about what motivates and drives their politicians, and they are right to question the commitment of certain parties to good government.

I will explain why we opposed the original Bill. The way that the Minister has handled the passage of the first Education Bill and the second education Bill has been nothing short of a disgrace. Her proposals have been ill thought-out, and the introduction of the first Bill before adequately thinking through the content of the second has been unsuccessful. Throughout her ministerial career, the Minister has claimed that she is all about change. However, when it comes to the crunch, she is unsure of the change that she wants. That is no way to run a Department.

The Education Bill will create the largest quango in Europe in that it will deal with the administration of an education system in a country that has a total population of 1.7 million citizens. The Minister has repeatedly stated that the education and skills authority (ESA) is being created to tackle educational underachievement. However, by reducing the abilities of a school and its board of governors to manage their own affairs, maintain the school ethos and make meaningful decisions, the Minister has again missed the crucial point, which is that educational underachievement must be reduced.

The Ulster Unionist Party originally supported a streamlining of the administration of the education system in Northern Ireland. However, the draconian powers that will be assigned to the ESA do not reflect the original proposals. The failed process has meant that, effectively, progress on the introduction of proposals for the second education Bill has been stalled. There are serious concerns that the Minister's proposals will ultimately remove the ethos basis of our schools in the long term. The Minister's treatment of the controlled sector has raised serious concerns about the entire review of public administration (RPA) project. We need equal representation from all sectors; no one sector should be above another.

The Minister has failed to get consensus, so she has decided to ignore the correct legislative process. By introducing interim governance and management arrangements, the Minister has, effectively, bypassed the House. In their respective amendments, the SDLP and the Alliance Party have sought to remove the reference to interim arrangements undermining the authority of the Assembly. However, both those parties are wrong, so we respectfully reject both their amendments.

The Minister has undermined the Assembly by giving authority over the reformed education and library boards to the chairperson-designate and the chief executive-designate of the ESA. We recognise that it is good practice for people to be appointed as designates in anticipation of forthcoming legislation, as was the case when the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill was proceeding through the House. However, designates to bodies should not have power

over existing structures. That is what the Minister is proposing. Therefore, the Minister is bypassing both the House and the Committee structure in the Assembly, and she is doing a grave disservice to our democratic system.

When the Minister made her statement, the Ulster Unionist Party asked her a number of questions that she refused to answer. Many of those questions remain unanswered, so I will ask some of them again.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member's speech thus far has been full of broad and sweeping statements about the Minister bypassing legislation. First, which Act has the Minister bypassed? Secondly, the Member said that the Minister's ESA Bill removes the power and authority of boards of governors. I ask the Member to quote the clauses in the ESA Bill that remove those powers. Those clauses do not exist, but, if the Member knows different, I ask him to quote them. Secondly, is the Member aware that significant clauses of the ESA Bill are sponsored by his party colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning?

Mr McCallister: The Member made three points; he may have failed to count them all. He knows full well that the Committee has been treated disgracefully since the beginning of the process. Where is the Bill? If he was so confident about his arguments, the Bill would be in front of us. However, it is nowhere to be seen. When will the House debate the Bill? It should be debated in and sponsored by the House after having been through the Education Committee. It was tabled to come to the House in November 2009. It was pulled from the schedule then and again subsequently. Where is it today?

Questions are outstanding about the legal status of the chief executive and chairman designate. What powers do those offices have? Given that they have not been legally constituted, should they have any powers over existing structures? The Minister must answer those questions in the House today. We need answers to questions about the structures and the legal implications of all the mess and chaos that has been created. The Minister is proposing to give power to designate members of a body that does not legally exist. Do education and library boards or the new reform structures that the Minister has announced report back to a chief executive and chairman of the ESA, which is in shadow form and has no legal framework for existing? Such questions must be addressed.

Some other problems with the interim relations include the fact that people are leaving education and library boards either because of retirement or because their time is coming to an end. Can we guarantee that we can fill the positions adequately? The Minister has exhibited a mixture of shambles and authoritarianism;

that must stop if this place is ever to become a symbol of stable and good government.

To gain consensus, the Minister must go back to the drawing board on this issue. The ESA has the potential to completely alter education provision in Northern Ireland. It concentrates unacceptable powers with the Minister and is no longer merely a part of an RPA process of streamlining. It creates structures that will facilitate the greatest change in education in Northern Ireland for a generation. In the absence of consensus for her Bill, the Minister has decided to force reforms through by decree. Northern Ireland's political system will work only if all political parties value co-operation and have a desire to build consensus.

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

Mr McCallister: It is obvious that some parties value decree and diktat more. However, we must all move to change that.

Mr Lunn: I beg to move amendment No 1: leave out all after the first 'Minister of Education' and insert

"and the Executive to secure consensus on the Education Bill; further notes the unacceptable nature of the Minister's interim governance and management arrangements; and calls on the Minister of Education and the Executive to agree urgently an acceptable resolution to allow the Bill to proceed."

We do not have enormous difficulty with the motion as it stands. However, we propose the amendment to make the point that the blame for the impasse lies not only with the Minister but with her Executive colleagues, perhaps even more so.

The ESA Bill is probably the most important of the 45 items that we believe are logjammed at Executive level. It seems to be an undisputed fact that the Executive have not had a single discussion on education for two years. That is a disgrace. As a result, there are two areas of chaos in the education system: the well-documented transfer mess and the failure to progress the ESA Bill, which is the subject of this debate.

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

The motion notes with grave concern the failure to ensure consensus. Our amendment would lay the blame on the Executive without letting the Minister off the hook entirely. There is no doubt that consensus has not been achieved on some aspects of the Bill, as John McCallister said. There are genuine concerns on the unionist side about the situation in the controlled sector and the rights of transferors, not to mention the usual suspicions that the maintained and Irish language sectors are getting a better deal.

Surely the way to sort out those matters and others is to bring the Bill before the House for full discussion and resolution.

12.30 pm

John McCallister said that the Committee for Education had, in some way, been sidelined on the issue, but we have spent more than a year scrutinising the Bill, and we have looked at it line by line.

Mr McCallister: Does the Member accept that the Committee was promised sight of the second Education Bill a long time before it arrived?

Mr Lunn: That is a fair point. We were promised the second Education Bill at the beginning of June 2009, but we did not receive it until the last day of September 2009. I agree that that is no way to do business. However, there were more than 100 amendments listed to the first Bill; it is not as if it has not been scrutinised. The Minister has also tried, more than once, to bring the first Bill to the Assembly. I ask: who is at fault? Who is holding it up?

A few weeks ago, when the Minister made her statement on that issue, we discussed the interim arrangements for continuity of administration of the system. My party has reservations about the temporary arrangements, about the limited number of appointees to the education and library boards and the possible illegality of the whole exercise. At the end of the day, the situation was forced on the Minister by Executive intransigence. The administration system had to be maintained in some form.

My party does not believe that the interim arrangements undermine the authority of the Assembly. We see them as a temporary expedient to cover a difficult situation. The bigger problem will arise if no resolution is found. Where do we go from here if we do not have the ESA? Do we go back to having a smaller number of education and library boards? We are heading for chaos again. The final part of our amendment merely changes the emphasis again, and lays the responsibility on the Minister and the Executive to allow the Bill to progress.

A tremendous amount of work and preparation, to say nothing of significant expenditure, has gone into making the ESA a reality. Given the attitude of the Ulster Unionists at the start of the process, when Basil McCrea vowed at a Committee meeting to fight the proposal tooth and nail, it is heartening to assume — by the wording of the motion, if not by the wording of Mr McCallister's speech — that that party is now prepared to consider the Bill's passage, even if it has to be suitably amended.

Mr McCallister: It has to be seriously amended.

Mr Lunn: OK. I will change that to "seriously amended".

I look forward to hearing the DUP's attitude to the situation, and particularly the views of the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, who has now joined us. Two weeks ago, during a Committee meeting,

Mervyn Storey announced, with what appeared to be considerable satisfaction, perhaps relish or even glee, that the ESA Bill was dead in the water and was not coming back. That is, more or less, a quote. The ESA is now central to the future of our education system, but it is being threatened with extinction without even being allowed to come into existence. I have not heard any concrete suggestions for an alternative, except for the status quo or some vague amendment to the existing structures.

Much has been said recently about the relevance of private Member's motions. I attended a Business Committee meeting not long ago during which Lord Morrow expressed the strong view that there were too many private Member's motions and that the Assembly was becoming a talking shop. I agree with him, but surely the lack of Executive business and legislation is making room for those motions.

Mr McCallister: Bring the Bill.

Mr Lunn: Bring the Bill. I hope that events elsewhere this week may provide the goodwill that is necessary to allow important business, such as the ESA Bill, to come before the House. I also hope that the motion before us, suitably amended by my party, will be discussed in a constructive way and that the message that goes back to the Executive and the Minister is that the whole House wants progress on the ESA.

Our education debates normally degenerate into a combination of Minister-bashing or justifying the Minister, with no winners or losers. Perhaps this debate will be different. Mr McCallister set a reasonable tone in his contribution, but if Basil McCrea had been here, it might have been different. The motion seeks consensus: in the Alliance Party, we have time to look at these things, and that word is derived from the Latin word *consentire*, which means to agree or to feel together.

I have a vision in my head, which may take some time to realise, of Basil McCrea, Mervyn Storey and Caitríona Ruane feeling together and agreeing, but we will have to wait for that. In the meantime, I ask the House to support our amendment.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá an-áthas orm leasú uimhir a dó a mholadh don Tionól inniu.

I beg to move amendment No 2:

"leave out all from 'believes' to 'Assembly';"

The position surrounding the Education Bill is symptomatic of much that characterises the Executive; namely, the stasis that lies at the heart of government here. That leads to instability and concern among the general public and the agencies that are affected by the lack of agreement. The situation with the review of public administration is similar. It is holding up the

reform of local government and causing consternation among those affected.

As Trevor Lunn said, the Committee for Education devoted a great deal of time, including an extension to the normal period of examination, to ensure the proper scrutiny of every clause of the Bill. It is extremely disappointing to me, as a member of that Committee, and, I am sure, to colleagues, that the matter has not been progressed to date. The delay has caused a great deal of anxiety to the staff of the education and library boards and to those who work in and are responsible for schools. They are uncertain about what lies ahead, and they need certainty in this situation.

Many people have also raised concerns with us about the interim arrangements that are holding things together. On average, the interim boards have only six to nine members, made up of transferors, trustees and teacher representatives, but they are expected to govern the education and library board areas until the so-called transition boards come into place in February or March 2010. We are told that interviews are under way to fill those positions, but there is no definite commencement date for new board arrangements. Indeed, prospective members of the interim boards do not know how long they will have to continue in that role.

The lack of certainty creates an atmosphere of insecurity, and it does not inspire confidence in the Minister, her Department or government in general. At a time of economic recession, the last things that we need are further uncertainty and insecurity surrounding arrangements that were supposed to deliver savings that would benefit front line services.

Much responsibility has been placed on the shoulders of the interim boards, and many people are now asking whether the arrangements are robust enough legally to oversee the delivery of services. I see that, for a change, at least one official is present to advise the Minister. Perhaps, therefore, the Minister will tell us whether she has had a comprehensive risk assessment carried out on the temporary arrangements. If so, will she tell us the results of that assessment? If no such assessment has been carried out, why not?

Turning to the democratic deficit in the new arrangements, schedule 2 to the Education and Libraries Order 1986 requires the Department to "have regard to the population" of each district council area when determining the number of council members to sit on education and library boards. Has the Minister taken regard of the population of each council area in determining the numbers of councillors on the boards? Why is there only one nominee for Moyle District Council and Derry City Council, for example, whereas Belfast City Council has four? That was the case at the beginning; I hope that it has changed in the interim.

The Committee for Education also raised the issue of teacher appointment committees. Once again, I ask whether the Minister has fully addressed that issue. Has she given due consideration to the impact that the creation of smaller boards would have on the representative requirements for statutory teaching appointments as set out in schedule 3 to the 1986 Order? There is a requirement to have three teachers on those committees, and that has to be facilitated in the new boards. What impact will that have on the make-up of smaller boards?

A further question raised by the Committee was that of transferor representatives and the requirement for all boards to have at least two transferors. What action has the Minister taken to resolve that issue?

Those are just some of the questions arising from the temporary arrangements. However, the real issue is the logjam at the heart of government; the situation that has led to the Bill being mired in disagreement. Time has caught up with the ESA. It was to have delivered savings of £20 million a year to front line services. It seems that those savings have gone up in smoke. We are in a situation whereby not only are the savings no longer available but we face new and deeper cuts that will go to the heart of front line services.

The Minister needs to deliver on the ESA, special needs, transfer, literacy and numeracy, school improvement, and the strategy for the nought-to-six age group, to name but a few issues. So far, there has been a lot of paperwork and even more words, but the time for action has come. Theory is fine, but it is now time to put it into practice. It is time for delivery for our children; they need it, and our people demand it. If there are disagreements over parts of the Bill, let us resolve them through engagement.

There has been a lot of talk of partnership in the past week. Now is the time to practise partnership working in order to resolve the outstanding issues. We can no longer allow the Bill to remain in abeyance. It must be brought to the House and agreed, so that the arrangements that arise from it can be put in place. If that is not done, it will reflect very poorly on the Minister and the Executive. The public mood over the past week has clearly indicated that the public are fed up with the logjam at the heart of government here and that they want issues to be resolved. I urge the Minister to take the necessary action to ensure that the issues around the Bill are resolved without further delay. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): The Committee undertook substantial scrutiny of the Education Bill and published a comprehensive report on 30 September 2009. The report's executive summary started by agreeing key amendments to the Bill to recommend to the House. The Committee's main theme was the need for clarity, certainty and

confidence in the ESA's role in regard to several areas of the Bill where those were clearly lacking, as evidenced by the education stakeholders.

The Committee's main concerns included the ESA board membership; the role of its committees; proposed schemes of employment and management; the general duties of the ESA; and issues regarding controlled schools.

As regards the Minister's interim governance and management arrangements that were put in place because the ESA was not established on 1 January 2010, the Committee initially wrote to the Minister on 25 November 2009, and to departmental officials on 4 December 2009, following the Minister's statement to the House on 1 December 2009.

At a Committee meeting on 2 December 2009, some members raised concerns with senior departmental officials regarding the membership of the transitional education and library boards, namely how that will reflect the community that they serve and whether adequate account was taken of population levels in the various councils, as outlined by the Deputy Chairperson a few moments ago. Other issues that were raised included the absence of a teacher appointments committee for the Belfast Education and Library Board and the anomaly that enables such a committee to operate in a suspended South Eastern Education and Library Board.

12.45 pm

The Committee wrote to the Department on 4 December 2009 to seek clarity on all those issues of concern. The letter included questions about the role of the chairperson designate of the ESA and the chief executive designate of the ESA as an additional accounting officer of the Department, and it requested information on interim governance arrangements and other education bodies, such as the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). Having received no response to those questions, the Committee, at its meeting on 13 January 2010, agreed to write to the Minister to request an urgent written update on the position regarding the implementation of interim governance arrangements across all sectors, including council representation on the education and library boards. The Committee still awaits answers to all its questions.

Furthermore, the Minister of Education wrote to the Committee on 26 January to inform us that she had received a convergence delivery plan from the chairperson designate and the chief executive designate of the ESA. At last week's meeting, the Committee noted the Minister's views about the importance of the convergence plan to the delivery of savings in the Department's 2010-11 budget. However, members raised concerns that the plan is being progressed without prior consultation

with the Committee and before the education and library boards have been reconstituted. There will not be an opportunity, therefore, to consult the boards properly.

I will make my concluding remarks as a Member of the House, and, indeed, I wish that I had more time to tease out the issues that need to be raised on the Floor. Let me pose a question: why is there no ESA? Mr Lunn said that, at a Committee meeting, I announced with some "glee" that the ESA is in the bin. I support the motion and thank the Members who tabled it. It is not only that the Minister of Education has failed to secure consensus. Even worse, the Minister of Education has failed to deliver equality. We have a Minister who struts the world stage as the champion for equality. Education was to be at the heart of everything that she does. However, when it comes to the sector in which 95% of Protestant children are educated, there is either no equality or the Minister's own version of equality.

I would like to deal with three issues of concern. I outlined these issues in a letter three or four months ago, but I still await a reply from the party on the Benches opposite. The first issue is the controlled sector. The Minister tells me that I abdicate my responsibility with regard to working-class Protestant areas. Let me make it abundantly clear: I represent people in those areas, I come from one of those areas, and I am proud of that. I assure the Minister that she will not be able to continue to discriminate against those people in the way that she has done to date. The place of the transferors, as of right —

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Two legal rights were conferred on the transferors.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: The first right conferred on the transferors is their place on the board of governors. The second is their place on the legal structures, which will be maintained and —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As Mr Lunn said, private Member's motions in the House have thus far not proven to be effective or relevant. If, as all Members hope, the discussions going on in another place prove successful and politics continues to be conducted through this avenue — at least, I assume that that is what all Members hope — politicians in the Chamber will have to realise that they are legislators and that it is unacceptable to bring forward meaningless motions without credible alternatives.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Give me one second.

It is also unacceptable for Members to deliver speeches that contain broad, sweeping statements that have no basis in reality or fact. In his great speech, Mr McCallister, a Basil McCrea substitute, made broad statements about the education service being in crisis, about the Minister ignoring the Committee for Education, about the ESA Bill removing the powers of boards of governors, and so on. At no stage did he refer to the clauses in the Education Bill that back up that statement; nor did he refer to any Act, of this legislature or any other, that the Minister has ignored. He did not do that because they do not exist. Why let facts get in the way of a good story? If those facts existed, and if I were him, I would have quoted each of the clauses and the Act of which the Minister was in default, and I would have made that my case. When there are no facts, however, people make broad statements and hope that they get away with it. They throw in a few lavish comments about crises and hope that the media picks up on them and prints the stories on the front pages of newspapers.

If Members are opposed to the Minister's interim arrangements, they should bring forward alternatives. If there are no alternatives, bringing forward a bland resolution such as this is no good. If the interim measures are unacceptable, Members should state where they are so. In the absence of the Education Bill, is it unacceptable for a Minister to introduce an effective and efficient way forward for the administration of education? I, for one, do not think that it is. Mr Storey's party talks about needing an efficient and effective way to run government and how we need to cut away the layers of bureaucracy. However, every time he and his party are presented with a plan that brings forward measures that sweep away bureaucracy, they oppose it.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No.

They oppose those plans, in the case of the education boards, because it is about jobs for the boys. It is about jobs for DUP councillors — it is usually boys in the case of the DUP — sitting around education boards and administering education. The education service is administered by five 35-member boards —

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will not.

It is an ineffective and inefficient way of delivering the service.

The Minister — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should take his seat. Where it is obvious that a Member does not wish to give way, other Members should not persist.

Mr O'Dowd: The Minister brought forward plans because she had to. The Bill has been blocked at Executive level. Until it is implemented, the Minister has responsibility for the delivery of £20 million worth of savings through ESA. Mr Bradley referred to those savings during his speech. Mr Storey may roll his eyes; perhaps £20 million is nothing to him, but I know a lot of people to whom £20 million is a whole lot of money.

At the end of the day, the Minister has to find £20 million worth of savings. They can and will be found through the interim arrangements, and they will be delivered to front line services. In the absence of a plan from everyone else, Mr Bradley's prediction will come true: those savings will be lost and added to the £75 million that already has had to be taken out of the budget. As the result of an Executive agreement, all Departments are losing significant amounts of money. When that is added to the £75 million that the Minister already has to find, we are into serious problems in our classrooms. It then becomes reality.

Some Members have talked about the failure of the Education Bill to look after the controlled sector, but what have the five education boards done, over their 30 years of service, to look after the controlled sector? Six months ago, the DUP beat on our door and said that the controlled sector has been left behind. I agree. How do we bring the controlled sector forward, look after it and ensure that educational attainment in the controlled sector is brought up to the standards that are achieved in the maintained sector?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr O'Dowd: I looked for one document when I prepared for this debate. It was not a research paper for this debate; I looked for the research paper on underachievement in education.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr O'Dowd: That is what Members need to keep focused on.

Mr Ross: The Ulster Unionist Party motion mentions the failure of the Education Minister to find consensus on the Education Bill. It is not novel for this House to believe that the Minister of Education has failed to achieve a consensus, or even tried to get consensus on some issues. Trevor Lunn said that there are a number of educational issues on which there is no agreement, not just post-primary transfer. Therefore, it is not novel that we find ourselves, once again, talking about a crisis, or whatever one wants to call it, in education because we cannot find any agreement.

I joined the Education Committee towards the end of its scrutiny of the Education Bill: I am making a habit of that, I joined the Committee for the Environment when it was considering the Taxis Bill. There were many months of line-by-line consideration and scrutiny of the Education Bill, and it was clear, even at the tail end when I joined, that issues had been left unresolved. There were issues on which the Committee could not find consensus, and some of them required the Minister to take action to find a conclusion.

That is the process that every legislature in the world must follow. After a Bill is introduced in the House, it is debated in the Chamber before going to the Committee, at which stage amendments are proposed by parties, and bits of the Bill are taken out or changed.

Mr McCallister: The fact that that is the normal process is key to our motion. Mr O'Dowd talked about this being a "legislative Assembly" and he referred to "meaningless motions". Where is the legislation?

Mr Ross: The issue is this: when does it become clear to the Minister that she has not got consensus? It was very clear to the Committee that the Minister needs to amend the proposed legislation to try to build consensus. Until the Bill is acceptable to the majority of Members, it will not be brought forward and agreed. That is the issue.

If we look at what is on the agenda of the House tomorrow, we will see that amendments to the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill proposed by the Minister and Members are due to be debated. That is how the process works. The Democratic Unionist Party tabled a number of amendments to the Education Bill when it was due to be brought before the House, because the Minister had ignored our party's request for changes.

In moving the motion, the Member for South Down Mr McCallister said that the first Education Bill was almost finished before we got sight of the second one, even though the Committee had been promised that it would see the second Bill well in advance, so that members would know what they were working on. Again, we were disappointed.

There are a number of issues with which there are problems. Those problems have been expressed inside and outside the Committee and we want to see progress made on them. They relate, in particular, to the controlled schools ownership body and the controlled sector.

The Bill, as currently worded, removes the transferors from the ownership of the controlled schools estate, which they gifted to the Northern Ireland Government in the 1930s and the 1950s. As part of that gift, the TRC nominated representatives to boards of governors in primary and secondary schools and to education and library boards. That was very much to protect and

safeguard the interest that they had in education and to reflect that the estate was initially theirs.

On the Catholic maintained side of education, the Catholic Bishops will be trustees, with significant power over the schools estate. We do not want to see an imbalance created in the schools estate system between the Catholic maintained and the controlled sectors. We have seen no movement on that issue from the Education Minister, and she is refusing to come back with any amended plans.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: The situation is worse. During the interim arrangements, and before the reconstitution of the education and library boards — because there will be no such a thing as transitional boards — the Minister has failed to appoint councillors. Therefore, the teacher appointments committee, which is responsible for appointing staff in controlled schools, cannot meet. In the maintained sector, the Minister has not followed her statement of 1 December 2009 to tell the House what she is doing with the CCMS. Then her minder, John O Dowd, who is sitting behind, talks about "jobs for the boys". That case must be explained.

Mr Ross: That point has been made continually, and it seems to be ignored by the Minister and her party continually. The membership of the ESA board has also caused concern. Not only do we want TRC representatives on it, as of right, but the representation of councillors to provide that local democracy element is important as well. The councillors who are there represent their wider community and party strengths, which is another issue on which we have not seen a great deal of movement.

Until we see such movement, and until the Minister recognises that she must listen to, and act on, the concerns of the other side of the House in order to get legislation through, there will be very little progress on the Bill. That is how the Assembly operates. She cannot go off and do as she wants: she needs to try to build consensus and to take action that will win the support of this side of the House.

1.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that interventions must be made through the Chair. I will not tolerate remarks being made across the Floor.

Mr Kinahan: When this Assembly received its mandate, nominated an Executive and set about its work, it had three major projects that it needed to complete before its dissolution next March: Health Service reform; local government reform; and reform of the education system. In 2008, Minister McGimpsey succeeded in the first of those tasks by seeing the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill through the House. Without the Ulster Unionist Party's involvement

in the Executive, it looks increasingly likely that they would now be on course to fail utterly to reform anything.

Leaving aside local government and focusing on education reform, I must say that the Executive are failing. However, unlike reform of local government, with which the hold-up is almost totally down to the Executive's general dysfunctionality, the failure to reform education is, for the most part, down to the Minister's inability to compromise and to come to an agreed solution that might pass through the House. Almost any other Member would have done a better job of consensus building than the Minister.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: No, I am going to carry on.

The Education Bill is stuck in the Executive for the simple reason that the Minister knows that it would be pulled apart and that she would be forced to a consensus position with the other parties. Amendments to the legislation may have brought the Bill to the point at which a clear majority of Members would have been in a position to support it. However, as a result of the Minister's dogmatic approach to her office, she will get nothing through.

Members on these Benches will oppose both amendments proposed to the motion. However, there is broad agreement among the parties that tabled them and my party, and we welcome their engagement, so we respectfully disagree with them and hope that they will support us in the vote on the motion.

We firmly believe that the interim arrangements undermine the House's authority. The House has accepted in principle that an education and skills authority should be established, and it is accepted practice that the Minister can make preliminary shadow appointments once that has been done. Minister McGimpsey did just that during the course of his reform agenda. However, the spirit of showing such latitude to a Minister should not extend to those shadow appointees, who are acting as if their positions have statutory authority. They do not. The Assembly has not established an education and skills authority. The appointments to it are in shadow form and are intended to provide those shadow appointees with a chance to form the structures of the planned body. They are not entitled to be told to administer existing structures.

The interim arrangements undermine the House's authority because it has not yet changed the existing structures. When it does, the Minister should act to implement the House's will. Until then, she must continue to implement the letter and spirit of existing laws. Mr Lunn said that the measures are temporary, but how long is temporary and how long must the whole education system wait?

Finally, I shall focus on the last line of our motion, which:

"calls on the Minister of Education to urgently seek a resolution that is acceptable to all parties in the Executive."

That means achieving consensus. All eyes are on the Minister. The whole of Northern Ireland wants consensus and for us to get somewhere, and everybody is screaming for an agreed way forward. I firmly support the motion.

Mr Craig: I support the motion, which mentions:

"the failure by the Minister of Education to secure consensus on the Education Bill".

However, there seems to be very little consensus on anything to do with education.

When I joined the Education Committee, a little over five months ago, the lack of consensus and the lack of work on the question of transferor representatives jumped out at me. It was astounding to see the amount and the level of work that had been done with the bishops in the maintained sector and the protections that were put in place for them. Yet, there was no protection whatsoever for the representatives of the Churches that had handed their properties and their education system over to the Government a number of years ago. Indeed, there was a lack of consensus not only on that issue but on the arrangements for the make-up of the board. I found it astonishing that, only months before the Bill was to be brought before the House, there was no agreement on the number of board members or on the members from political parties who were to sit on the board.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: Will the Member add to that list, as a third element, the confusion that reigns with the party opposite in respect of the Catholic certificate? The Minister says that she has no resources, and the deputy First Minister tells us that there is a review. Therefore, they cannot agree among themselves how they will deal with that inequality, and, all of a sudden, they are trying to bury the issue.

Mr Craig: I thank the Member for his intervention; it leads me to the other issue that I wanted to talk about, which is equality. It goes to the very heart of those reforms and the lack of consensus on them. If there is to be equality of treatment, a lot of things need to be sorted out. We need equality of treatment for the controlled sector, and we will get it, because the House will not allow anything else to go forward. We also need equality of treatment across the board in the education sector. We cannot have any sector ring-fencing and looking after itself by requiring qualifications that nobody else is allowed to have. That is not equal or fair, and it needs to be dealt with.

In the five months since I joined the Committee, I have seen no efforts to reach consensus on any matter

that has come forward from the Minister. That leads to the public's perception that this place is not functioning, and, unfortunately, in some cases, that perception is absolutely correct. There seems to be no way forward on the education issue, and until the Minister gets the idea planted in her head that there must be agreement, the reforms will go nowhere.

I appeal to the Minister to sit down, start listening to what other parties are saying and reach consensus on the way forward. No one here is arguing about the need to reform education, and no one is arguing about the fact that we need to make savings in the education system. However, we want equality and fairness of treatment with regard to those arrangements.

I was not pleased by what the Minister's helper had to say about the education boards. The education boards have done a very good job, and they have looked after the controlled sector for the past 30 or 40 years, under very difficult circumstances. There were Government-sponsored attempts to undermine that sector, and they gave preferential treatment to other sectors in education, yet the boards did the very best that they could with what little they had, and they looked after the controlled sector remarkably well. I have nothing but admiration for the people who worked under those conditions and delivered for that sector. They delivered for my education, and they are delivering for my children's education, and they do so under enormous strain, some of which has been caused by the Minister who is sitting here today.

I have no difficulty in commending the motion to the House.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. San am gairid atá agam le freagairt ar an díospóireacht, ba mhaith liom déileáil le trí shaincheist.

In the brief time that is available to me to respond to the debate, I want to deal with three issues.

Ba mhaith liom freagairt ar chuid de na pointí a rinne Comhaltaí, agus ba mhaith liom a mhíniú cén fáth a bhfuil leasú oideachais, agus achtú an Bhille Oideachais go háirithe, chomh tábhachtach. Ba mhaith liom a mhíniú don Uasal McCrea, don Uasal McCallister agus dá gcomhghleacaithe cén fáth, in ionad a dtacaíocht a thabhairt do thairiscint den chineál seo, gur chóir dóibh bheith díocasach le tacú le mo mholtaí.

I want to respond to some of the points that were made by Members, and I want to explain why education reform, especially the enactment of the Education Bill, is so important. Furthermore, I want to explain to Basil McCrea, who is not in the Chamber, Mr McCallister and their colleagues why they should be to the fore in supporting the proposals rather than supporting the motion that is before the House. I will say a few words about what I have been trying to do in bringing

forward proposals within the context of the review of public administration (RPA). The proposals are firmly rooted in three important concepts.

Ba mhaith liom caighdeán a ardú. I want us all to raise standards. It is frightening to hear complacency such as that just expressed by Mr Craig. It worries me to hear such complacency, because far too many young people are being failed by the education system. It is complacency such as that shown by the Member who has just spoken, Mr Craig, that is helping to create the conditions in which it is OK, or people think that it is OK, for children from working-class communities to be failed. Nothing could be further from the truth. We have to move away from that argument of complacency and understand that if we are to change things, we need to get off the fence and bring about the changes that are so badly needed. We must do that rather than try to justify inaction on such issues as school improvement.

On reaching school-leaving age, half our children secure neither the qualifications that are necessary to continue in education nor those that are sought by most employers. Some 52% do not achieve five GCSEs at grade C or above, if we include the necessary qualifications in mathematics and English. That is unacceptable. Therefore, there should be no complacency. Such a situation exists, despite the best efforts of the teachers and classroom assistants who battle against the disadvantage that the system places against them. They have to battle because the parties opposite refuse to engage on the real issues about our selective system that discriminates against our children, the systemic failure and institutions that are more interested in their reputations than the children whom they are supposed to serve.

Schools that have the highest percentage of children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds and the majority of children with special needs are doing the best that they can under difficult circumstances. Some of our secondary schools are among our highest-performing schools, but others are facing serious difficulties. Action has to be taken to ensure that children are not failed in our system.

I cannot justify spending billions of pounds every year on a system that fails half the children whom it is designed to serve. We need to close the attainment gap between those schools that serve some of our children well, in some cases very well, and which leave others to the vagaries of an outmoded model of child supervision, free child-minding and underachievement. In some post-primary schools, less than 15% of pupils achieve basic school-leaver qualifications. In similar schools that have the same profile of pupil intake, management type and social environment, the figures are two or three times better. Even those figures are not good enough. Why must we settle for a school lottery that means that children in some parts of the North of

Ireland have to settle for a one in six, or less, chance of securing an education that will offer them realistic life chances?

Those are not small matters. Research shows that children who do not succeed in school are more likely to suffer from poor health and lower life expectancy, be more economically inactive and may be more likely to be caught up in the criminal justice system. In short, if we do not improve our schools, we condemn our children to poor outcomes, poverty and second-class citizenship.

1.15 pm

Ineffective education services for the individual means ineffective outcomes for the individual, the economy and society. Those who seek to maintain the status quo seek to maintain a system that fails. Please do not continue to seek to maintain the status quo.

I want to generate greater efficiencies in the way in which we use the resources that are available to us. I do not need to tell Members how difficult the financial environment is. As a consequence of the implementation of the RPA reforms, £8 million in efficiency savings were to be realised in the current year, £13 million next year, and £20 million every year thereafter. Under a unitary system of delivering education, RPA would almost halve the number of senior managers in the education sector, which would mean more money for front line services. I want to see less management and improved educational outcomes.

Members will recall, however, that the education budget was reduced in the expectation that those savings from reforms would be realised with the establishment of the ESA. The delay in setting up the ESA has, therefore, a direct impact on education services, and those who continue to delay and block the ESA have questions to answer. I will not allow the convergence process to be blocked, and that is why I brought forward proposals. I am not prepared for another generation of children to be treated in the way in which previous generations were treated.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Education: The Executive's recent decisions to reduce budgets for 2010-11 adds to the significant pressures facing education next year. We must protect the classroom and front line services. Those who proposed the motion, and those who support them, need to decide whether they want managers or teachers. The new authority will change the way in which services are managed and delivered to realise further efficiencies in the way in which services are delivered.

Savings can be achieved by establishing common services in financial management, personnel, catering,

transport, the management of the schools estate and many other areas. Those changes will offer improvements in what we do, and savings from reduced bureaucracy can be redirected to support pupils where they need it most: in the classroom. That is the approach that I support.

Mhínigh an Ráiteas a thug mé don Tionól ar an gcéad lá de mhí na Nollag cén fáth nach mbeadh sé indéanta sprioc-dháta an Tionóil chun an t-údaras nua um oideachas agus scileanna a bhunú roimh an gcéad lá de mhí Eanáir na bliana seo. Chuir mé in iúl daoibh an rún atá agam le socruithe idirthréimhseacha a thabhairt isteach.

My statement to the House on 1 December 2009 explained why it would not be possible to achieve the Executive's deadline of establishing the new education and skills authority (ESA) by 1 January this year. I announced my intention to bring in transitional arrangements. The motion criticises those arrangements. However, those who tabled the motion and those who support them do not offer a workable alternative and ignore the difficult financial situation faced by public services here, as confirmed in the recent statement by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

The Executive determined that there must be more streamlined administration in education. Transitional arrangements are being established to allow that administration to operate, to perform its mandatory functions, and to address the very challenging financial context until some Members in the House catch up with the reality that change is necessary, change is happening and change will continue to happen. *[Interruption.]*

As part of those transitional arrangements, I had asked the Chairperson — the Cathaoirleach — and the chief executive designate, to produce a convergence delivery plan to bring a much stronger focus on those convergence activities, which should be taken forward before the ESA is established. I have received a plan that provides the basis for moving forward and it has been sent to the Committee. My officials are engaged in briefings with the education organisations on the convergence process and how it will be moved forward.

My colleague John O'Dowd dealt with the sweeping statements that Members on the opposite Benches made to justify their attempts to maintain the status quo and to accept the complacency of current arrangements.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Education: Therefore, we must keep on the path of the convergence activities across —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister should resume her seat.

I remind the House that whenever it is obvious that another Member does not wish to give way, Members should not persist in trying to make interventions. I

also remind the House that courtesy, good temper and moderation must be shown at all times.

The Minister should continue.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. John O'Dowd mentioned the sweeping statements that Members on the opposite Benches made. I agree with him. The Members on the opposite Benches feel that those statements protect them and that the public do not know what is happening. However, I visit schools in every sector, and I am aware that the public know exactly what is happening. They also know who is attempting to block change and what parties are failing working-class children in Protestant, Catholic and ethnic minority communities. The Members on the opposite Benches can continue to put their heads in the sand, but Sinn Féin will not do that, and I, as the Minister of Education, will not allow that to happen.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: What about equality?

The Minister of Education: The Member mentioned equality. Equality for all our children is the way forward; we cannot continue with a system in which inequality is the cornerstone. There is a new cornerstone now, and that is *comhionannas*, *comhionannas* agus *comhionannas* — “*comhionannas*” is the Irish word for “equality”.

The Education Bill was introduced with the agreement of the Executive, and the Assembly voted overwhelmingly to agree its Second Stage. Mr Basil McCrea's party voted against the Bill at that Stage, but to date it has offered no alternatives, no new policies and no new ideas. However, all the other parties supported the need for change, and by a 6:1 ratio, Members voted for the principles that are enshrined in the Bill. Is that not agreement and consensus?

Either way, I have asked the Executive to consider all the proposed amendments that the Committee for Education, other Members and I have suggested. I agree that we must agree on how to move forward, and I look forward to discussing that at the Executive. However, I will not wait for Members on the opposite Benches to stop trying to block change. We must work for our children.

The mindset of the proposers of the motion is that we face dissension rather than agreement and that we face wrangling and political point scoring rather than serious debate about how best to serve our young people. Today in the Chamber, and over the past few weeks and months, we have heard much about justice. This is a debate about justice. It is also a debate about health, the economy, equality, the future and the political process that can make the future better. If education improves, health improves. If education improves, the economy grows. The Executive will get credit for that, and we can stop failing our children.

Every policy that I bring forward is interconnected, and although people believe that change is not taking place in education, massive change is happening every day. As the Minister of Education, I have brought forward, and I will continue to bring forward, a series of radical reforms that are aimed at the education system and a series of interconnected policies that put the child at the centre.

Whenever the parties on the opposite Benches speak of what they protect, they protect narrow interests and those who can articulate their own wants. They protect those who have built and managed a system that perpetuates failure. I will not accept that. I am Minister of Education for all children, not just for some. I also speak for the disadvantaged, the vulnerable and those who have been condemned to poverty, poor health and further injustice in the past.

At all times, the Department has engaged with the Committee, and we have kept it informed. We will continue to do so as the interim arrangements are developed. The Department is working to ensure that all sectors have equality, and it is working very closely with the transferors to deal with their genuine concerns. However, the parties on the opposite Benches must not hijack genuine concerns for the sake of political expediency.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister should bring her remarks to a close.

The Minister of Education: Equality is at the core of everything that the Department will do.

Mrs M Bradley: I support amendment No 2. I have no intention of reiterating everything that my colleague Dominic Bradley said regarding the problems our party has with the Education Bill and its content, but it is important that the Minister finally gets the message that there are problems that she must address soon. It is not acceptable for a Minister to stand in the House to respond to a motion and deem that she has heard the usual rant from any Member. If we are ranting, it is clear that there is a problem.

It is difficult for Members to understand the Minister's intentions exactly. That being the case, how can the public be expected to understand? It is frustrating when constituents ask us for guidance and assistance and we explain to them that we, as Committee members, are as much in the dark as them. How stupid does the entire system look when young qualified teachers ask us whether they can apply for jobs in schools where they know there are vacancies? Such appointments cannot be made until the governing bodies of those schools are properly constituted by appointing public representatives to the boards. However, one local newspaper reported that the non-creation of the ESA is a disaster, and that, furthermore, the Department is continually producing layer upon layer of administration,

which clearly illustrates all the negatives that the Minister has told us she wanted to eradicate.

Puzzling arrangements have been put in place to steer boards through these troubled waters, and it is looking more and more likely that those arrangements will not be as short-lived as the Minister hopes. Our P7 children who chose to sit one or more of the transfer tests are anxiously awaiting the results. We are in limbo, and it almost feels as if we too in the House are awaiting the outcome of a testing time, although we are much more able to deal with the stress and strain of that. However, if we do not find a common pathway through the Education Bill maze, we will still be lost this time next year.

The points made here today express the concerns of the representatives of the temporary boards, the statutory teaching appointments committees and the representation of the transferors. They also express the need for partnership to resolve the outstanding issues regarding the progress of the Bill. Progress needs to be made; there is no doubt about that. As my colleague said, we heard a lot about partnership in the past week. Partnership should not end at the door of Hillsborough Castle; it must be brought to the heart of government, particularly to deal with the issues surrounding a Bill such as this.

I urge the Minister to listen to the genuine concerns of all Members that have been expressed today. Our children are at the heart of the issue. I am not talking about any one set of children, but about all of the children of Northern Ireland. It is very important that everyone knows that our ambition is to deal with all of the children and not with one particular group.

We have not come to the House to engage in a rant, which the Minister claims to have heard from Members. I am not ranting about the issue; I am saying what other Members are thinking. It is time that the Minister listened and made the changes. She should bring the Bill before the House for Members to deal with all of the issues, so that the children can have what people in any free country should have: the freedom of choice; the freedom of speech; and the freedom to disagree with the Minister.

Mr Lunn: I do not want to repeat everything that I have said; unusually, I have to make a winding-up speech on the amendment that I introduced. That amendment calls on the Minister of Education and the Executive to agree urgently an acceptable resolution to allow the Bill to proceed. That is not really any different from the motion, which is the point I would like to emphasise, because it will be some time before the Bill comes to the House. Alastair Ross seemed to indicate that he wanted the Minister to make the Bill acceptable to the unionist population before bringing it to the House. However, then it would not be totally acceptable to the other side of the House.

1.30 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: Why would that not be acceptable to the entire House? I get weary of the Minister for a number of reasons, including the number of times that she has told us about equality. The problem is that she cannot deliver equality — or she can but is not prepared to. It is her version of equality. On three issues — the controlled sector, the ESA board and the Catholic certificate — she has failed miserably to prove that she can deliver equality. Everything else that she says is hot air.

Mr Lunn: Yes, hot air indeed.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: Does the Member not want equality?

Mr Lunn: I am all for equality. I shall continue, because there was too much in the Member's contribution for me to comment on.

My problem is that sometimes I agree with one side of the House and sometimes with the other side. I am not alone in that. For instance, Jonathan Craig talked about the rights of the transferors and the need for the ESA board to be completely representative. The Minister has, to some extent, given way on the board issue, and she has said that she is working on the transferors problem. I completely agree with the unionist side on that, but the Minister is right to talk about raising standards. The point always comes up that the Protestant working class underachieves, and that is partly a result of the existing structures and processes that provide education. It is disingenuous for unionist politicians to appear to make the case that they want things to stay as they are when they are not working correctly.

Danny Kinahan said that the Minister of Health had been successful in reforming the Health Service. I am not sure that I totally agree with that. We do not get the minutes of Executive meetings, so I wonder what attitude the Health Minister has taken at the Executive to the efforts to progress the Education Bill.

Mr O'Dowd: Mr Kinahan may not be aware that the RPA on health was so successful because Sinn Féin approached the issue sensibly, did not play party politics and ensured that the Bill went through. If the Ulster Unionist Party were to take the same approach to the RPA on education, it would find that the journey was far smoother.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: You are playing party politics.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I have tried to keep the debate good-natured, but it has got to the stage where I will have to apply the rules of the House to any Member who persists in shouting across the Table. I also suggest that, when referring to the Minister, Members say "Minister", rather than "she".

Mr Lunn: Perhaps I will get five extra minutes now, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Dominic Bradley summed it up well. He called for engagement and said that the public were completely fed up. The public are completely fed up with this place, rather than being fed up specifically with the wrangling over the ESA. In fact, I doubt that half of the public know what ESA stands for. However, it is a major issue for us, and, sooner or later, it must come to the Floor of the House. The Minister and the parties that disagree with her should have the courage of their convictions and allow it to be debated in the Chamber.

Most of the 100 amendments came from the Committee for Education, and they did not follow party lines absolutely. There were areas of crossover, and it was not, nor should it have been, a straightforward unionist/nationalist confrontation. It is far too important for that. I urge the Minister and her Executive colleagues to allow the Bill to proceed. That is the thrust of the motion and the one issue on which all Members agree. It is time to move on and discuss the Bill here in a parliamentary way.

Mr McCallister: In light of your remarks, Mr Deputy Speaker, I shall try to conduct my speech in a good-natured manner.

As my colleague Mr Kinahan and I have consistently repeated, we have not been opposed to the establishment of an ESA or to the streamlining of the structures of education administration. No one is opposed to that. We all think that we can do better. There is money to be saved, and we want to realise those savings. What we did not want to see was a super-quango taking over everything. The ESA has, effectively, taken on a life of its own. That is what we have opposed in the Bill.

As Mr Lunn mentioned, when the Bill was in Committee and it came to a vote, there was crossover and support from various parties on different issues. It was not a simple orange/green divide. Everyone in the House believes that we should and must address educational underachievement. The debate is about where that educational underachievement is occurring, its causes and how we address it. The views of the Minister and her party that some of that underachievement can be addressed through blunt instruments, such as using free school meals as a sole measure, differ from those of others.

I will follow up on some of the comments made by Members. I think that all Members agreed that education is in a mess.

Mr O'Dowd: No.

Mr McCallister: Sorry, I beg your pardon, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it important that Members reflect accurately the mood of the House and contributions from other Members?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that Mr McCallister will bear that in mind.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Member for that point of order. I was about to say, "All Members on these Benches but not Sinn Féin". As others mentioned, Mr O'Dowd was here mainly in his role as the Minister's minder or helper — I think that that was the phrase used.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. As I am sure you are aware, Mr O'Dowd is here as an elected Member of the House. Would it be useful for Members who are contributing to the debate to be aware of that?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Member is aware of that.

Mr McCallister: I had no idea that Mr O'Dowd was so sensitive. I recognise that he is an elected Member and congratulate him on his election.

In moving amendment No 1, Mr Lunn discussed many things: the controlled sector; the maintained sector; Irish language; and some of the failures that we have had and some of the delays, which I spoke about, in bringing the second Bill to the Committee. It was initially to come to the Committee in June and was delayed to the end of September. In his winding-up speech, Mr Lunn also mentioned the crossover in party support on the various issues, which I thought was a useful point.

Mr Bradley talked about the uncertainty and the fact that we needed to bring certainty. That is the crux of the debate: we have to bring certainty to our education system. There are big concerns about the interim boards and how those link in, about whether any regard has been given to the population of council areas, and about teacher appointments. Mr Bradley mentioned the £20 million of savings, which, the Minister admitted, will be difficult to achieve. Mr Bradley spoke about the special educational needs (SEN) review, the strategy for children aged nought-to-six and other policies.

Mr Storey spoke initially as Chairperson of the Committee for Education and gave some of the background to the scrutiny of the Education Bill. The three main principles that the Committee sought were clarity, certainty and confidence, and it considered its role in trying to achieve those. He then spoke, as a Member, of the delay in finding out how the structures in the interim arrangements will work.

Mr O'Dowd complimented me and said that I had made a great speech. I thank him; I am most grateful to him for his kind remarks. If he wants to intervene, he could tell me that again. He challenged parties to make

proposals. However, on the transfer issue, all the parties, except his own, are involved in trying to make proposals to resolve the transfer issue.

Mr O'Dowd: It is rather the case that all the other parties have asked someone else to bring forward transfer proposals for them. They have none of their own.

Mr McCallister: Even the Member will admit that it is good to see someone working to bring forward proposals. There is agreement from four of the main parties to try to find a solution to the transfer problems. Mr O'Dowd might ask himself what he has been doing to address the impasse in education.

Mr Lunn: We in the unofficial group of which Mr O'Dowd so disapproves have set up another body to give us expert advice. Perhaps you could learn something from that. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member will resume his seat. No sooner have I settled Members on one side than the other side starts up. I remind all Members that the rules on speaking through the Chair apply equally. I will have equality all round.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to Mr Lunn for his intervention.

Mr O'Dowd spoke of "jobs for the boys" in respect of councillor representation on education and library boards.

Mr Ross spoke of the failure to find consensus. Legislators around the world make proposals to work with the executive branch of government to find consensus. The Minister's colleague, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, had to change her proposals and accept amendments to her Diseases of Animals Bill. Similarly, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety had also to adopt changes to his legislative proposals. That is how the democratic legislative process works.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Is it not ironic that the Minister tells the House that we are playing politics when speaking about the transferors? Does the Member agree that, just after Christmas, the party opposite put a proposal to the transferors and that that proposal was rejected? The party opposite has been unable to get consensus from an organisation that represents 95% of Protestant children in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Chairperson for that important point. I am willing to give way to the Minister if she will tell us how she will move that issue forward. I do not see any movement from her.

I will touch on some of the Minister's points. She spoke of raising standards, the financial arrangements and why the ESA was to be established by 1 January 2010. There is no dispute about raising standards in

education; every Member is committed to it. She spoke at length about the importance of good education for health, the economy and life expectancy. I know, from serving on the Health Committee, that those are crucial. The Minister spoke of interlinked policies. However, if a major policy link or several major links in the policy do not work, all will end in failure. The special needs review, the transfer process and the nought-to-six strategy were mentioned. The Minister said that there are serious problems in the classroom and that we need to protect our children; some might say that we need to protect them from the Minister.

1.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, Members should note that, if amendment No 1 is made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2, as its purpose will have been overtaken by the decision on amendment No 1. If that is the outcome, I will proceed to put the Question on the motion as amended.

Question, *That amendment No 1 be made*, put and negatived.

Question, *That amendment No 2 be made*, put and negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 58; Noes 24.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Burns, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McFarland, Mr McGlone, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Mr P Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McCallister and Mr K Robinson.

NOES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Doherty, Ms Gildernew, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy,

Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr P Maskey and Ms S Ramsey.

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with grave concern the failure by the Minister of Education to secure consensus on the Education Bill; further notes the unacceptable nature of the Minister's interim governance and management arrangements; believes that these interim arrangements undermine the authority of this Assembly; and calls on the Minister of Education to urgently seek a resolution that is acceptable to all parties in the Executive.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

HSSPS: Potential Savings

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 Hamilton: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to instruct the performance and efficiency delivery unit to assist the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety by investigating potential non-front line savings within the DHSSPS remit and producing initial recommendations within three months.

It would be fair to characterise some debates on health in the Chamber, particularly those that deal with the Department's budget, as perhaps not being the most convivial or cordial. Indeed, some Members may suggest that they have, at times, not been the most constructive of debates.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): Puerile.

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

Mr Hamilton: The Minister of Finance and Personnel suggests that those debates have been puerile, and they have been childish at times. I am not saying that I will not be distracted by other Members' comments during the debate, but I brought the motion to the House because I want to achieve a common goal on health expenditure. I will start off on that basis and I hope to finish in the same way. I hope that the debate continues in the same vein.

We must all recognise the constraints that are placed on public expenditure at all times, particularly as we move forward in Northern Ireland. We must also recognise that there is a deep concern across the community about the effect of efficiencies and constraints on our Budget in future. We all recognise that there is a particular concern about healthcare, even when trusts sometimes make sensible savings suggestions. There is an understandably emotive response to such suggestions, because of the way in which health services affect us, our loved ones and those vulnerable people in society about whom we care.

As we face and recognise those facts, there have been, to borrow the words of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, puerile calls simply for more and more resources. That will not suffice, particularly in such economic times.

We need to have a debate about how to move on and achieve more with the resources that we have, rather than simply looking for more, and going to a well that

is getting drier all the time. Now is a good time to start that debate, particularly when there are indications of models of best practice in health expenditure elsewhere in the United Kingdom. We do not have to look too far to see such models. I refer, of course, to the recent report by the Nuffield Trust, a well respected organisation, into health differences since devolution across all four constituent parts of the United Kingdom. That report underscores the need to focus full square on driving further efficiency into the NHS in Northern Ireland.

Some of the Nuffield Trust's report's headlines clearly show that, despite £1,764 being spent on health per head of population in Northern Ireland compared with £1,514 in England, the NHS in England is more productive. The report compares a feast of spending on health in Northern Ireland and other devolved regions with a relative famine in England. In spite of that, even though England has fewer doctors, nurses and managers per head of population, the Health Service there makes much better use of its resources. A key example in the report states that, in 2006, no patients in England waited more than three months for an outpatient appointment, while 61% of patients in Northern Ireland did. Professor Nick Mayes, who was involved in compiling the report, said:

"Northern Ireland for a long time has had higher spending, more resources, more beds, more doctors, more nurses, more GPs and tends to have longer waiting times and lower levels of productivity as measured by the relationship between the number of staff and what we measure in terms of the services delivered."

That is a good synopsis of that report. However, it is not just that report. That report in isolation would be one thing, but there are other examples. The Nuffield Trust report echoes what the Appleby review said about staff productivity in Northern Ireland being 17.4% lower than that in England in 2006-07. There is also the work of the productivity working group. That begs the question that if everyone — Appleby, Nuffield and others — says that there is less productivity in the NHS in Northern Ireland, they cannot all be wrong, and there must be serious validity to the points that they raise.

I read recently in the 'The Economist' about the "love-bombing" of cash on the Health Service, not just here in Northern Ireland but across the United Kingdom post-1999. It is clear that Northern Ireland has not made the most of that. However, that is entirely understandable. If a body is being lavished with cash, maybe efficiency is not foremost in its mind, and it will spend the cash to do just what it can, without thinking about driving efficiency or best practice. That is understandable, given the severe increase in expenditure post-1999, particularly with a Labour Government coming into power. However, those days are gone. Things have to change, and we have to have efficiency and productivity in the forefront of our minds.

Devolution is about making a difference, and the Health Minister has tried positively to make differences, particularly with the likes of free prescriptions. That is one difference that we have compared, maybe, with other regions, particularly England. However, a severe difference in the productivity of our Health Service is not a difference that we want to sustain throughout devolution.

Work is needed in three broad areas. The first is better performance management. Every argument put forward by the Nuffield Trust's report talks about instilling better performance management in the health services in regions such as ours. The argument in the report is that because England faced expenditure constraint over the past decade, it had to have much better performance management or the system would have collapsed. The report states that that standard of performance management is not in place in Northern Ireland and needs to be put in place.

That is where, as stated in the motion, the performance efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) could play a key role in moving the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) towards better performance management, in a not dissimilar way to the way in which the Prime Minister's delivery unit (PMDU) in Westminster operates. I do not think it a coincidence that the PMDU worked at that sort of problem in the middle of the past decade, and that there was better performance management, delivery and productivity in the NHS in England.

If the Department of Health in Northern Ireland is too close to the issue to see where efficiencies can be made, then it is a good idea to invite or instruct someone, such as PEDU, to do that job on its behalf; someone who comes from a different perspective and who will not be shackled by the inertia that is sometimes present in our Departments.

Savings could be made, or things could be done better, in other areas, such as tackling wasteful administration and bureaucracy. I acknowledge that reducing the number of boards and trusts in Northern Ireland, as instigated by the current Minister, will reduce administration in the long term. However, I must express my concern that evidence has been presented to the Health Committee suggesting that the new trusts saw management costs rise by 13% in their first year of operation. That is not what we expected or what we were promised, and it had better not continue in the future. If reorganisation under RPA is to mean anything, it is that savings are made. That promise has not happened. On top of that, between 1998 and 2007, there was a 96% increase in managers and an 85% increase in senior managers. I have heard that there are 57 PR managers being employed across the various trusts. It is clear that savings could be made.

However, that is not enough. How things are done needs to change too. Even though we admire the dedication of our health professionals, I am sure that all Members have an example, from personal experience or from that of their loved ones, of waste and inefficiency, and of how things could be done better in the Health Service. That is needed more than cutting out wasteful administration and bureaucracy. Yes, the latter is the first step, but things need to be done differently and in a more productive way. That is the lesson from the Nuffield Trust report.

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

Mr Hamilton: If the NHS in Northern Ireland is as efficient as the Health Minister tells us, then what has he got to fear from inviting PEDU to look at the scope for further efficiencies? If PEDU finds his argument to be right, surely that would bolster his position and give him a better argument with which to face the Finance Minister?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Hamilton: I urge the House to consider the motion carefully and give it backing in the common cause that we all have, which is to have a more efficient and effective Health Service in Northern Ireland.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

My party recognises and accepts that the Executive must respond to the straitened economic circumstances. The relatively benign economic conditions that pertained at the time we negotiated and agreed the Programme for Government have changed dramatically for the worse. It is absolutely incumbent on the Executive and respective Ministers to be seen to respond to that, and to be alive to that challenge.

We are equally clear that efficiencies are a pre-requisite response among a range of options that the Executive must consider. Sinn Féin is adamant that front line services must not be detrimentally affected in any way. A reduction in front line services cannot be described as efficiency; it can only be accurately described as a cut. That is a defining issue for Sinn Féin. My party believes that we can identify further efficiencies.

Mr Weir: Do not tell me that that is on the agenda as well.

Mr McLaughlin: I am glad that you picked up on that point.

My party believes that additional savings can be identified. I will not pick on a particular Department because that will exclude the political affiliation of that individual Minister, but, spending Departments are responsible for dispersing significant sums, and it is

clear that additional savings can be achieved. We have not come to the end of that process by any means.

2.15 pm

I take on board the points made by the proposer of the motion about the independent studies that indicate that there are significant savings to be made. Indeed, in respect of the Health Department, that point can hardly be denied. However, I take issue with the motion in that we should take a broader scope and operate on a broader palette. There is a danger that the motion will be seen as partisan or even, God forbid, part of an internal unionist pre-election squabble.

Mr Weir: I am surprised that the Member has missed the convergence of unionist unity on this issue; I await Mr McNarry's speech on the matter. The motion has sincere motivations, and, indeed, the proposer tried to word the motion in such a way that it would not be regarded as having a go at the Health Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute added to his speaking time.

Mr McLaughlin: I really look forward to seeing this unionist convergence in due course.

I support the concept of PEDU. It is a good initiative that was brought forward by the then Finance Minister, and it has already demonstrated its value. To better recognise the collective responsibility of the Executive, it would be better if PEDU examined potential for savings on the basis of invitations from respective Ministers. I am convinced that there are possibilities for savings without the collateral effect of a reduction in service quality.

The key definition of genuine efficiencies is to spend less money for the same outputs. PEDU has a role to play, but it should not in any way impinge on Ministers' rights to address their respective responsibilities under the Programme for Government and the supporting public service agreements. Further conflict, confusion and controversy within the Executive team of Ministers could be created inadvertently if the Finance Minister directs PEDU to come in.

A much better and more collaborative approach would be for PEDU to come in and play a role when there is acceptance that we can do no other than cut our sails to suit our cloth. Each Minister should see the role of PEDU as a resource rather than a threat, and each Minister should have the right to invite PEDU to come in and offer advice, expertise and assistance. On that basis, my party cannot support the motion.

Mr McNarry: Confrontational motions of this type are, at best, unhelpful. The motion implies widespread and serious maladministration in the Health Department, which, according to the Minister, is quite simply not true. The motion runs counter to the attainment of a new spirit of co-operation in this place, which we are

all trying to advance. It can only be deeply damaging to that spirit of co-operation.

Members will judge the intention behind the motion for themselves and recognise, as I have, that it does not mention any other Departments. Are the Members who proposed the motion not concerned about potential non-front line savings in the Department of Education, which is having serious difficulties with its budget? Are they not concerned about the Department for Regional Development, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department for Social Development or the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development?

When announcing the formation of PEDU on 15 April 2008, the then Finance Minister Peter Robinson stated:

“The core approach of PEDU will be collaborative in nature, working with Departments and, through them, with the wider public sector to get the best public-service outcomes for our community.”
— [*Official Report, Bound Volume 29, p247, col 1*].

He went on to say:

“I envisage that from this moment on, PEDU will fade into the background in a public sense. Its role is to collaborate with Departments. It is not there to say ‘PEDU has arrived’. PEDU is not the story.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 29, p249, col 1*].

Is the Members’ motion reflective of the words of their party leader?

If we are to build a more collaborative, co-ordinated and effective Executive, surely we must stop unnecessarily throwing stones at each other. The proposers seem keen to pursue the subject of assistance, so how about a focus from the Finance Minister on the rate arrears that are accumulating in his Department? What is the actual figure of arrears? Apparently, it lies somewhere between £124 million and £137 million. What is the written-off figure for uncollected rates? What impact is the shortfall against targets having on the Executive right now? What will it be in future years?

The constant carping criticism of the Health Department by certain Members of this House is deeply damaging to the morale of my hard-working, hard-pressed constituents who work in the Health Service. The people who framed this motion made reference to making savings other than in front line services, but that smart dressing up is a calculated insult to health workers, and the Members concerned should be ashamed of themselves. To make such a distinction totally misses the point that the service as a whole depends on the front line and support services to operate effectively. It is a Health Department that operates in a population of 1.7 million and cannot, therefore, access the kind of savings that can be achieved across a much larger mainland population of 60 million. Economies of scale that operate across such a large population are simply not possible in a restricted area the size of Northern

Ireland, yet people expect, and have a right to expect, the same level of service.

This motion takes no account of the considerable efficiencies that are already achieved in the Health Service here. Trusts in Northern Ireland have, for example, met their break-even duty far more consistently than their counterparts in England. Those are not my words; they are the words of a report of the Northern Ireland Audit Office. Those break-even duties are achieved despite the fact that our trusts have a far more rigorous regime in place. It focuses them to break even every year, whereas those in England only have to break even, on average, over a three-year period.

Back in September last year, the Health Minister, in response to a question from Patsy McGlone MLA, revealed that the cost of the reform of public administration to health was some £73 million, which was mostly in voluntary redundancy payouts, but that it would generate some £53 million of recurrent annual savings. It is working and it can be done.

I remind the House that health savings and efficiencies have been effected against a background of a rising demand for services. I oppose this unwarranted motion today, and I recommend strongly that the House do likewise.

Mr Gallagher: The SDLP is opposed to this motion, particularly in relation to the implication that PEDU will be imposed upon the Department of Health. We have not yet seen a great deal from PEDU, but its role should be to advise and assist all Departments.

The Finance Minister has made it clear that, because of the economic crisis, budgetary cuts have become inevitable. We have already had an announcement from the Minister about some of them. It is vital that we, as elected representatives, make sure that those cuts do not impact negatively on front line services and ordinary people. We have to make sure that it is not the weak and the vulnerable who are first to suffer here, which is often the case when cuts are imposed by central government. Ordinary people must not bear the brunt of any cuts.

We accept that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should not be immune from cuts, particularly given that it receives around 42% or 44% of the overall Budget. However, because of the essential nature of the Health Service, and given the demands made upon it, we must do everything possible to protect its front line services. We urge the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to do more to close the 14% efficiency gap between our Health Service and the Health Service in England. The excessive bureaucracy that remains in some parts of our Health Service must be targeted.

Mrs D Kelly: I want to make the point that we are not comparing like with like. One key difference, for

example, is that social services in England are delivered by the local authorities, not the Health Service. Mr Hamilton made no reference to that.

Mr Gallagher: My colleague has raised a good point, and she is correct to say that Mr Hamilton did not highlight that important difference.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: I am not giving way again. I want to go back to the issue of a three-year Budget. The SDLP was the only party in the Assembly to oppose and vote against the Budget. We did so because we felt that it was not in the best interest of service delivery to lock the Assembly, or any of its individual Departments, into a three-year spending straitjacket. As we have seen, various situations can arise during that locked-in period.

A one-year run of the Budget would be a much better and more realistic way of addressing such difficulties when they arise. The recent cold weather, for example, increased the pressure on accident and emergency services, particularly on the departments that deal with fractures. That caused extra, unnecessary pressure.

Looking to the future, it is clear that public services face more cuts, particularly if there is a Conservative Government in London. We should put any pressure that we can on the Westminster Government to examine their own spending priorities before they begin to wield the axe on our Departments.

In my constituency, for example, there are 11,000 elderly people, 2,500 of whom receive care. The level of that care can only be described as threadbare. The number of referrals grows week by week — in the past couple of weeks, it increased at the rate of 100 a week. However, the budget has not increased. The level of front line service for those people is not what it ought to be, and it should be increased. However, giving PEDU a role in the Health Service is not the way forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time will commence at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until that time. The debate will resume following Question Time, when Mr McCarthy will be called to speak.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Mr Deputy Speaker: Further to the Speaker's announcement at the start of today's business, I remind Members that the Business Committee will tomorrow reschedule for next week the questions that were due to be answered by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Today's questions to the Minister of the Environment have been brought forward.

ENVIRONMENT

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

1. **Mr B Wilson** asked the Minister of the Environment if he will take action to expedite the adoption of the Belfast metropolitan area plan. (AQO 678/10)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): The public inquiry into the Belfast metropolitan area plan (BMAP) concluded in May 2008, and prior to completing its report and making recommendations to the Department, the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) is considering all the information arising from the inquiry. PAC has indicated that there is a preliminary timescale for delivering the report to the Planning Service as early as summer 2010. Upon receipt of the report, the Planning Service will consider PAC's recommendations and a plan will be prepared for adoption. The adoption date will depend on when the PAC report is received, but it is unlikely to be adopted before 2011. However, upon receipt of the PAC report, I will consider any available options to expedite the adoption of BMAP.

Mr B Wilson: I thank the Minister for his answer, although it was rather disappointing. The North Down and Ards area plan was completed in 1995, and consultation on BMAP started in 2001. The draft BMAP was supposed to protect villages such as Crawfordsburn and Helen's Bay, which were designated as areas of village character. However, the draft plan is not in operation, and as a result, many architecturally important houses have been demolished and replaced by apartment blocks. Every year, we lose more and more houses. If BMAP is not adopted soon, there will be nothing left to protect. Therefore, before it is adopted, would it not be possible for the Minister to introduce some measures to protect our built heritage? In another two years, there will be nothing left.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members should not walk or stand in front of Members who are speaking. A number

of Members have already done so, so I ask others to be careful.

The Minister of the Environment: I share Mr Wilson's concerns. In fact, I shared those concerns back in 2000, when the area plan in question was first mooted by Minister Foster, the then Minister of the Environment. In case there is any confusion, I am referring to Minister Sam Foster. I was opposed to developing the plan in the way in which it has been developed because I thought that there was too much to take on in one go. Some 10 years later, here we are without an adopted plan. I share Mr Wilson's concerns about the process. Unfortunately, the matter is now with the Planning Appeals Commission, and as the Member well knows, that is an independent quasi-judicial body.

The Member also wanted an independent environmental commission to be set up. I do not want to interfere with the independence of the Planning Appeals Commission. It has a particular role to play, and it must do its work in the way that it has set out for itself. I cannot expedite matters until the PAC has completed its work.

Mr A Maginness: I heard what the Minister said, and I am not blaming him for the delay in the process. However, given that that process started in 2000, not only is it exhaustive, but it is exhausting every stakeholder. Surely a mechanism should exist whereby the Minister or the Department can intervene and guillotine the process so that BMAP can be officially adopted. My understanding is that BMAP will operate until 2015. To date, the process has taken longer than the resulting product will be in force.

The Minister of the Environment: The Member is right. Not only is the process exhaustive, but it is detrimental to good planning. On the one hand, people who wish to carry out developments do not have much guidance, and on the other hand, areas that require protection are not being adequately protected. I did not design the process; in fact, I opposed it in the House. However, I have inherited it. I cannot move it forward any faster until it comes back to the Department. While it rests in the PAC, I cannot move it forward any faster.

I have a word of caution: Alban Maginness comes from a legal background, and he knows that other area plans have been judicially challenged, so I am very cautious about using guillotines and leaving ourselves open to judicial challenge and making lawyers rich.

Mr McCarthy: As I understand it, Knock golf course is included in the Belfast metropolitan area plan. Will the Minister explain how its destruction can be allowed in his remit as Minister of the Environment?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member's question does not relate to the original question, but since he has raised it, I will deal with it. More than 500

letters of support were received for that planning application; there was only one letter of objection. The Ulster Hospital will benefit significantly and will be able to expand, and Knock Golf Club will be able to develop a state-of-the-art facility, which will be widely used by the public. The planning application has been widely supported in the community, and I would rather be in the position of Peter Robinson and others — on the side of the 540 people who submitted letters of support for the planning application — than in the position of the Alliance Party, which opposes it and is standing on the side of one resident.

Mr Shannon: No one has asked yet about the cost to the public purse. How much has BMAP cost so far?

The Minister of the Environment: From its development until March 2010, the plan will have cost £7·971 million. A huge amount of money has been spent on the process so far. Without doubt, more than £8 million has now been spent on BMAP. A flawed decision has left us without up-to-date area plans. We have spent huge amounts of money on it, to the detriment of the public purse.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Rose Energy

3. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Minister of the Environment when a decision will be made on the Rose Energy application. (AQO 680/10)

The Minister of the Environment: The Rose Energy planning application for a biomass fuel power plant was submitted in June 2008 and was accompanied by an environmental statement. The application was designated article 31 in September 2008, and on 11 February 2009, Rose Energy was requested to provide an addendum to the environmental statement. That addendum was submitted to the Planning Service on 12 June 2009. At the same time, Rose Energy submitted a new separate planning application for the abstraction of water directly from Lough Neagh. The new application for water abstraction was accompanied by an environmental statement. The water abstraction application was declared article 31 on 11 August 2009 and is being processed in tandem with the power plant application.

The requirement for water to cool the incineration process is an important element of the power plant proposal. Rose Energy initially intended to abstract water from an aquifer below the site. However, recent survey work revealed that it cannot provide the required volume of water. The result of the survey was a need to find an alternative water source.

On 28 August 2009, Rose Energy voluntarily submitted a further addendum to the environmental statement

accompanying the power plant application. Consultations on the addendum were issued to the relevant consultees on 1 September 2009. Neighbourhood renotification in respect of the addendum was issued on 7 September 2009, and advertisements were placed in the Lisburn newspapers on 9, 10 and 11 September 2009. Advertisement of the addendum was placed in the Antrim newspapers and in the three daily newspapers on 7, 8 and 9 October 2009.

In accordance with environmental impact assessment regulations, the public had four weeks from the date of the advertisement to submit representations regarding the environmental effects of the proposals. The four-week period ended on 6 November 2009. Planning officials are finalising their consideration of the Rose Energy case and hope to make a recommendation to me on the way forward shortly.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I thank the Minister for that detailed answer. The Minister must be aware that more than 8,000 jobs in the poultry sector rely on an affirmative decision on this case. In order for Northern Ireland to comply with EU regulations, the Minister will also be aware that we need a resolution on how to deal with poultry waste pollution. Will the Minister assure the House that he will not put a decision on the issue on the long finger; that he, and he alone, will make a decision on the matter; that we will not see further delays and public inquiries; and that we will see a ministerial decision to allow the Northern Ireland poultry industry to get out of the problems that it faces, as soon as is legally possible? With that in mind, will he inform the House what he is doing, and what he has done, to ensure that he is fully au fait with all the facts and not only with the emotions, of which we have read in the press?

The Minister of the Environment: To date, I have received more than 6,500 letters of objection and just under 6,500 letters of support. I will be pretty unpopular regardless of what decision I make. However, that comes with the territory. A decision will be made, and it will be based on the best knowledge and information that is available. To help to ascertain that information, I visited the site with senior planners and viewed it from all the critical points, including Lough Neagh. I met those who object to the project, those who applied for it, as well as senior advisers from my Department's water quality unit and the chief scientific officer from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. At each of those meetings, I sought to gain all the requisite information so that I will be best placed to give my considered opinion to the report when it comes to me. I will give the report a fair hearing and reading and make a decision thereupon.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister explain why the Department of the Environment is entering into the planning application when the proposed site is in a

protected area of high scenic value? Local residents would not be given permission to build a garage, but Rose Energy seems hopeful that it will be allowed to build a giant incinerator. Does the Minister agree that the best way forward would be achieved through a public inquiry in which all views could be aired?

The Minister of the Environment: The applicants have gone through a site-selection process. I will not give my views on that process until I have seen the report and read it in full. In fact, I will probably read it in full several times before I arrive at a decision. The Member asked whether it should go to a public inquiry, but that depends on whether all the information that is required to make such a decision is available. The indications that I have received from the Planning Service are that it has gone through an exhaustive process to garner that information. I have sought to get as much information as possible directly from those who support the application and those who oppose it, and as much independent advice as possible as well as requisite information from planning and science professionals to enable me to make a decision.

Mr Armstrong: Is the Minister aware of whether the Planning Service is considering any other planning applications for facilities capable of processing poultry waste that would meet the nitrates directive time frame? When will he make his decision?

The Minister of the Environment: This application will not meet the nitrates directive time frame; that is why I have had to extend it. That is an indication of the time pressures that are applied. If there are other means of dealing with this difficulty, they need to be brought forward, and applications will be made on how to deal with them. The nitrates directive time frame has had to be extended, but we will get away with that only for so long before the EU clamps down on us. Therefore, it is important that a decision be made on the way forward on the issue, one way or another.

High Hedges

4. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister of the Environment the cost of the previous public consultation on high hedges legislation and the predicted cost of the current consultation. (AQO 681/10)

7. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the timetable for the introduction of the high hedges legislation. (AQO 684/10)

14. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of the Environment what action he will take to ensure that councils with discretionary powers to levy fees in relation to the high hedges Bill will adopt a uniform approach. (AQO 691/10)

The Minister of the Environment: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 4, 7 and 14 together.

The consultation carried out in 2005 to gauge the extent and scope of the high hedges problem cost approximately £11,000. The predicted cost of the current consultation is likely to be in the region of £2,000. As I said in my statement to the House on 9 January 2010, public consultation on the draft Bill closes on 1 March 2010. My aim is to introduce a Bill to the Assembly by June 2010, with a view to having legislation in place during the lifetime of the Assembly.

2.45 pm

With regard to a uniform approach to the levying of fees, I have no desire to dictate to councils as to how much the fees should be, as there may be a variance in costs from council to council depending on overheads and operational procedures. However, I do not expect any difference in fees to be considerable.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister assure the people who may need to use the legislation that no costs will be applied to them?

The Minister of the Environment: I cannot give Mrs Bradley that assurance. We need to identify the costs that will be charged to local councils, and if we are saying that local government should bear all the costs, the House must make that decision. However, local government may not think that that is a particularly good idea, as it may cause people to engage in vexatious complaints, as opposed to real complaints coming forward when people have to make a contribution to deal with the problem.

Mr Easton: Will the Minister assure me that hedges surrounding farmland that backs on to private properties will be included in the Bill?

The Minister of the Environment: The Bill deals with the issue of light. Therefore, the legislation will deal with hedges that cause a problem with the light that enters people's homes and property.

Mr P J Bradley: Does the Minister have any plans to make the public aware of their rights following the introduction of the legislation?

The Minister of the Environment: We are going through the consultation process, and the public will respond to that consultation. When the legislation goes through the House — as I assume it will as it has widespread support — I have no doubt that it will receive significant public coverage. Local councils will have the task of administering the legislation, and I have no doubt that they will make information available on their websites, explaining how the legislation will work and the processes to be followed when someone has an issue with a neighbour's high or nuisance hedges.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Obviously, there are problems with evergreen trees, but will the Minister be including rows of beech and ash trees in the legislation?

The Minister of the Environment: The legislation will apply to trees that are planted as hedges as opposed to single trees. Action can be taken when people have planted trees that have become hedges and have been allowed to become overgrown. The legislation will not apply to single trees. It will apply to rows of trees or high hedges.

Mr Beggs: High hedges legislation has been operating successfully in England and Wales for several years. The Minister's predecessor declined to introduce such legislation during his period of office. Why does the Minister disagree with his predecessor, and why has he decided to introduce the legislation, although I welcome the fact that he has done so?

The Minister of the Environment: Previous Ministers had other priorities. As a public representative, I had a considerable number of complaints and dealt with a considerable number of people who had an issue with high hedges, and I wanted to deal with the matter. It caused the Department some difficulties as we had to get extra resources because our legislative team was very busy. I decided to push ahead with the legislation in spite of the fact that it would cause additional work and be an extra burden on the Department.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn, the Member is not in his place to ask question 6, and question 7 has been answered already.

Mourne Heritage Trust

8. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister of the Environment what the reduction has been in the grant aid to the Mourne Heritage Trust from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. (AQO 685/10)

The Minister of the Environment: I recognise the importance of NGOs, such as the Mourne Heritage Trust, and engagement with local communities to manage our environment. I have sought assurances from officials in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) that cuts to the natural heritage grants programme will be minimised this year, despite the overall reduced level of funding available to NIEA in 2010-11. That will lessen the impact on those bodies and projects seeking the renewal of grant aid.

The Mourne Heritage Trust has been offered a total of £220,000 over three years as a contribution towards its co-ordination of areas of outstanding natural beauty (AONB) management, which represents a reduction of 15% in the coming year as compared to the level of

support offered by NIEA this year. The trust will also receive over £96,000 for visitor and environmental management in the coming year, which is a slight increase on the current year. However, funding for an additional ranger, which was provided for the first time this year, will not be available. Taking into account existing offers, the trust will receive almost £230,000 in the coming year, which is 10% of the total budget of NIEA's natural heritage grant programme.

Mr W Clarke: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree with me that the Mourne Heritage Trust is vital in managing the area of outstanding natural beauty that includes the Mourne and Slieve Croob? Does he also recognise that areas of a similar size across the water receive millions of pounds?

The Minister of the Environment: Areas across the water that receive millions of pounds are very often national parks, and the Mourne area has not yet received that status. However, the fact that 10% of the budget for NIEA's natural heritage grant programme is being dedicated to one area is an indication that the Department cherishes the Mourne and believes that it is a vital area.

People may believe that the Health Minister is the only Minister with financial difficulties, but his Department's budget was cut by a lower percentage than mine, and everything is relative to percentages. My Department, with a budget of little over £100 million, had to find £15 million in efficiency savings, lost over £7 million as a result of a reduction in planning receipts, and had to spend over £2 million as a result of the equal pay settlement. Therefore, the Department is under severe financial pressure, and some difficult decisions have had to be made.

The Department is seeking to spread the pain and to keep everything going. Once it gets over its current difficulties, and when more planning receipts are received, it will hopefully be in a better position to fully support vital resources such as the Mourne Heritage Trust.

Mr K Robinson: I listened very carefully to the Minister's reply to the Member opposite. Will he tell the House what the current situation is regarding the Mourne area becoming a national park? The Minister rightly pointed to the successful attraction of moneys across the water. If that process was to be moved forward, what level of moneys could be attracted to a national park in the Mourne?

The Minister of the Environment: The Mourne Heritage Trust has already been successful in bringing in other streams of income. Indeed, the £230,000 it received from the Department this year is not the only money that will be made available to it, because it is very good at drawing down grant aid from other sources.

The Department is looking at introducing legislation to enable national parks to be developed in Northern Ireland, and where a national park or parks are developed will be a matter to be dealt with after the legislation has been approved. It could be the Mourne, the Fermanagh lakelands, the Sperrins, the glens of Antrim or Strangford. There are so many beautiful places in Northern Ireland that could be eligible for that status, but the first step is to ensure that the legislation is introduced to allow for their creation.

Planning: Blaris

9. **Mr Donaldson** asked the Minister of the Environment when the article 31 planning application will be processed for the proposed development at Blaris, which includes the new Knockmore link road.

(AQO 686/10)

The Minister of the Environment: That question is well timed. There is no current planning application in relation to the Blaris lands. A previous article 31 planning application for a major mixed-use development, including the new Knockmore link road, was withdrawn in June 2008, and a subsequent application has not yet been submitted.

Snoddons Construction Ltd and Killultagh Properties Ltd, the two companies behind the previous application, are preparing a development framework for the site, which is a key site requirement for Blaris under the draft Belfast metropolitan area plan (BMAP). I am pleased to report that good progress has been made on that and we are close to reaching an agreement. It is anticipated that applications for the development of the site will follow after agreement has been reached on the framework.

Mr Donaldson: Timing is everything in politics. I thank the Minister for his response. He will know all too well, as a representative of the area, that one of the problems inhibiting the further expansion of Lisburn, particularly the industrial expansion to the west of the city, is the lack of adequate roads infrastructure. The new Knockmore link road is essential in providing a connection between the existing roads network and the M1/A1 at Sprucefield. Can the Minister give us an assurance that, when considering the framework that will be developed, the link road is given priority in the phasing of any development at Blaris?

The Minister of the Environment: In relation to the master plan, there is considerable agreement between the Department and the developers on the nature of the development and how it should be divided among industrial use, leisure use, residential use, and other aspects. It is important that BMAP, when it is produced, gives us an indication of the number of housing units

that might be allowed at the site, which will then enable the full development to roll out.

At the moment, there are issues in respect of roads that need to be addressed. Given the benefits that that road will bring to the city of Lisburn, it may be worthwhile for the Member to pursue the issue with Roads Service in order to ensure that roads do not cause a delay in a project that will be hugely beneficial for transport linkages in that city.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 10 has been withdrawn.

Road Safety Council

11. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the review of funding to the Road Safety Council of Northern Ireland.
(AQO 688/10)

The Minister of the Environment: Members will be aware that, following a third, highly critical independent review of the Roads Safety Council (RSC), my predecessor, Sammy Wilson, wrote to the council on 9 December 2008 to confirm that funding would be directed away from central administration and into the front line road safety activities of local committees from 1 April 2009. The Department has been funding local road safety committees from that date.

I met RSC representatives on 16 July 2009 and allowed them to present their case for the reinstatement of core funding to the organisation. Following that meeting, RSC wrote to me with its proposals and asked me to reconsider the matter. Unfortunately, the RSC commission failed to provide any evidence of new or innovative programmes of activity that would provide added value to the delivery of the road safety strategy. However, I wrote to RSC on 22 September 2009, informing it that I was prepared to allow the organisation a further opportunity to make a proper business case for funding, and asked officials to engage with them.

Officials met representatives of RSC on 13 October 2009 and provided detailed advice and guidance on how to complete a formal business case. Professional advice was provided by a departmental economist. To date, no such business case has been provided by RSC and, given the fact that the financial year is almost over, it is a reasonable assumption that even if an appropriate business case were received, funding could not be processed during what remains of the current financial year.

Some 16 of the existing 18 local committees applied to the Department for funding for the current financial year. The Department approved approximately £33,000

of funding as a result of their bids. To date, eight local committees have drawn down financial assistance to promote local activities or events.

A new funding model will operate for the financial year 2010-11, enabling the Department to engage more fully with the voluntary and community sector and ensuring that it engages more effectively with local communities in the promotion of road safety. That will replace the previous system of funding solely to the Road Safety Council and the road safety committees.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for such a detailed response to the question. I ask the question as chair of the all-party group on road safety. There is a clear strategic role for the Road Safety Council in Northern Ireland, and I appeal to the Minister to meet a delegation from the all-party group to reconsider the Road Safety Council's plans, and, perhaps, to try to re-energise the business case in some way. Will the Minister agree to that?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member will realise from my answer that I have provided quite a number of opportunities to try to move the matter forward. One of the issues is that of the budget of £160,000, only 12% was used by local road safety committees to deliver front line activities in 2008-09.

When resources are tight, it is critical that any available money be used well and wisely. The Member knows that I will always be available to try to facilitate and to help where I can and that I will seek to be constructive in all such matters. However, unless it can be demonstrated that the money will hit the front line and be used in a way that can deliver on the ground, I will be hamstrung.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes Question Time.

3.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

HSSPS: Potential Savings

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to instruct the performance and efficiency delivery unit to assist the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety by investigating potential non-frontline savings within the DHSSPS remit and producing initial recommendations within three months.
— [Mr Hamilton.]

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Alliance Party has sympathy with the motion. Surely there can be nothing wrong with one Minister's helping another Minister. We are concerned that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is struggling to come to terms with the efficiency savings that are asked of him and agreed by the Executive. However, we must bear in mind the fact that the Executive include members of the Ulster Unionist and Tory party. We recognise the underlying weakness of the budget for health and social services in Northern Ireland, but it is another thing to say that it should be insulated from any changes to the public expenditure environment.

I am glad to see that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has arrived in the Chamber. I hope that his presence here does not have any buckling effect on the negotiations and deliberations that are going on elsewhere.

The health allocation for the 2008-2011 Budget cycle was simply and clearly inadequate. In the past decade, a significant uplift in health spending has taken place across the UK. That has reflected increasing demographic demands, such as a growing senior citizen population, and there is nothing wrong with that. Other demands include the need for more expensive drugs and treatments and the need to continue to invest in modern technology. Areas such as mental health and learning disability have rightly claimed an increased proportion of health funding.

The fact that per capita spending on health was and continues to be well ahead of the UK average reflects the wider problems of Northern Irish society. Investment in healthcare has flatlined against that in the rest of the UK. Bodies such as the Economic Research Institute have estimated that our health budget will be around £300 million short of what is required to keep pace.

It is disappointing that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety accepted and, indeed, celebrated his budget in 2008 as being a good deal. It

was clear to the Alliance Party then that it was far from being a good deal. Our preference was for more money to be allocated to health and social services in the first place. We would have sought to address the costs of a divided society to release more money for health and social services.

People must be realistic about the need to raise money if we are to have a quality Health Service. It is difficult to have it both ways. It is one thing to acknowledge the underlying flaws in an overall Budget, but it is another thing to say that no efficiency savings should be sought. Although we are sympathetic to the notion of ring-fencing the health and social services budget from further efficiency savings or cuts, that is not realistic.

The health budget accounts for more than half of the Northern Ireland Budget, so any ring-fencing of the health budget would mean that cuts in other Departments would be doubled. If health were exempt from the 3% efficiency savings, other Departments would have greater cuts to make, which would be unfair. That could entail swingeing cuts in education, enterprise and employment funding at a time when we are trying to regenerate the economy, make society more sustainable and create more much-needed jobs.

Mr Beggs: The Member said that a greater amount of money should have been given to health in the original Budget. By necessity, that would mean that money would have to come from other budget areas. Is the Member also saying that more money should not come from other budget headings? If that is the case, what is he actually saying?

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

Mr McCarthy: If the Member had been listening, he would have heard what I said. There should have been and there could be more funding. In fact, the Alliance Party will campaign for more funding to be created from what is being wasted on double this and double that throughout our society. Funding could quite easily come from that area. Hopefully, it will be forthcoming in due course.

Even at this stage, it is open to the Executive to suggest that health takes a lower share of the burden of cuts than other Departments. It is important that efficiency savings in the Health Service do not become cuts in public services. Administration costs, such as needless paperwork, need to be looked at. It is not a panacea or cure, as some people suggest, but there are undoubtedly real savings to be made in that area.

Finally, shifting resources towards public health and prevention needs to be looked at. Prevention is the main route that we should follow, and I know that a lot of work is going on in that area. If the main reason for higher health spending here is the nature of our health problems, then public health and prevention need to be

prioritised. That requires co-operation from other Departments and agencies.

The community and voluntary sector, which includes healthy living centres and areas such as investment in speech therapy, must not be seen as an optional extra but as a core function.

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

Mr McCarthy: It can often deliver services more efficiently and may have a greater impact on addressing health pressures early.

Mr Shannon: I want to make my comments on how savings can be made in a constructive fashion, because I believe that that is what we are all about.

Members are aware of the economic downturn and the fact that some things that are non-essential need to be cut back. We know that Departments are saving money by using water coolers instead of bottled water, printing only essential e-mails and introducing car sharing. Many people have taken such issues on board. However, there are certain essentials that it is important to retain: we cannot, at any stage, hit the front-line services by cost cutting.

Members all know and are well aware that our Health Service is among the best in the world, and we must ensure that it remains so. The fact is that, in the Province, 50p in the pound goes towards health services, unlike the Republic, where it is 35p in the pound. That is not a criticism, but it puts things into perspective. It seems to me that there must be something that can be done to reduce that amount without impacting on the service that is offered to the people of the Province.

I want to focus on the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland. In the 'Response of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland to the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government, Investment Strategy and Budget', the society claims that:

"Pharmacists have an important role in: relieving the workload of other health professionals, such as GPs and nurses; delivering cost efficiencies to the NHS; and, improving convenient access to health services for the public. Pharmacy should be a central consideration within any discussions around health service reform in Northern Ireland."

The Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland recognises the pressures faced by all Departments to make efficiency savings and states that:

"by working closely with the pharmacy profession the DHSSPS can achieve a number of cost efficiencies."

We ask the Minister to take that opinion on board. The response continues that:

"Examples include: taking workload pressures off other healthcare professionals such as GPs; helping Incapacity Benefit claimants to manage long term illness and potentially enable a return to work;

improving public health behaviours; and, ensuring best use of prescribed drug treatments."

I am anxious to know whether the Minister has investigated a more complex use of pharmacies as a way of offering front line quality services at a lower cost.

Everything that I speak about in the Chamber comes from people from my constituency. A constituent of mine who works in a pharmacy informs me that a substantial saving could be made by prescribing non-brand medication that has the same active ingredients but not the same cost. That would lessen costs for prescriptions and offer instant savings. I have also spoken to a pharmacist who is concerned about the money that is wasted with the dispense weekly and Medisure packages that offer prescription aid. Those services were introduced for people who were unable to get out to collect their prescriptions, but it is alleged that the service has been grossly abused by some of the larger pharmaceutical businesses and is offered to anyone on repeat prescription. That was not why the service was offered. The Minister should be aware that the service quadruples the cost of dispensing a prescription. It is, therefore, another example of a service that has cost more than it should have. I stress that, in some cases, the service provides vital assistance to people who are unwell. In other cases, however, the service is a way in which chemists can make money. Surely that should be examined as a potential means of delivering efficiency savings.

Those are issues that the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland has brought to the attention of Members. They are only a couple of the many examples that have been brought to my attention by those involved in front line services.

I am sure that, were the performance and efficiency delivery unit to be consulted, it would be able to offer a much wider range of ideas. It is time to use that unit's services and to save money for the benefit of all.

Recently, I asked the Minister some questions on heart surgery and operations. It concerns me that some people, due to staff shortages, go across the water for operations. Those operations cost more, and we should look into whether the same service could be offered here at a much better price. I think that it could. A significant number of rapid response units have lain unused in a trust car park for well over a year. I wonder whether such oversights and overspends could be avoided to deliver the required savings.

The Minister should get outside help. A fresh pair of eyes should determine what savings can be made. The motion is before us today so that all those issues can be addressed. Some underlying administrative costs must be removed, front line services must be retained and enhanced, and expenditure must be cut. I have made some proposals to the Assembly today, and many other Members have done likewise.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Michael McGimpsey has asked to be called as a private Member. I remind him that he speaks in that capacity.

Mr McGimpsey: I have no doubt, Mr Deputy Speaker, that, if I stray, you will be quick to remind me of my status.

I am happy to take part in the debate. A number of points have been made, some of which were constructive. I thank Mr Shannon for his attempt to be constructive. However, I have to say, having listened to the remarks of Simon Hamilton, that he made no effort to present anything other than a cynical, political argument, partisan in the extreme, on the Health Service. I have no doubt that that will also apply to remarks that are yet to come. It is interesting that, in Simon Hamilton's speech, not once did I hear the words "patient", "doctor", "nurse", "cleaner" or "porter". The whole thrust of his argument is that there are too many doctors, nurses, cleaners and porters who do not work hard enough. That argument does not go far in places such as the Ulster Hospital.

It is important to stress that a report by the Nuffield Trust formed the crux of Simon Hamilton's argument. The consensus in the Health Service is that, as far as Northern Ireland is concerned, that report is not fit for purpose. The data is some four years old, and the report does not even notice that the Department in Northern Ireland also provides social services, on which some £1.2 billion of the health budget is spent. It ignores the fact that, in England, there was a major drive to create efficiencies through the wholesale transfer of staff to private enterprises. Thousands of nurses were moved into private businesses. That was based on the idea that the efficiency ratio can be eased through maintaining the level of activity and reducing the number of nurses in the workforce by thousands. I am not sure that that is the way forward for Northern Ireland. I heard some DUP Members argue for some level of privatisation in the Health Service, but that is no way to proceed.

Over the past few years, two major exercises on creating efficiencies have taken place. One of those was the Wanless review, a key element of which was to reduce demand by placing a greater emphasis on public health. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's response was to create the Public Health Agency, a move that was accepted universally by the House, with the exception of the DUP, which voted against it. That was an example of the DUP voting against efficiency.

The Appleby report has, as Members will recall, been discussed on many occasions. Appleby made 26 recommendations, all but one of which have been implemented by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Health Service. The

one Appleby recommendation that is still to be implemented is the requirement for the Department of Finance to increase the health budget by 4.3% in real terms every year. That has not been achieved. This year, the Health Service budget has been increased by 0.5% in real terms. Even when we adjust that to account for changes in the inflation rate, it is still only an increase of just over 1% in real terms. Yet, as we explained in the House on a number of occasions, demand on the Health Service increased by 12% last year, and it is up by 9% this year. Therefore, Tommy Gallagher and Kieran McCarthy were right to say that health and social services are seriously underfunded in Northern Ireland.

3.15 pm

There is always room for efficiency; any sensible organisation looks for efficiencies at every opportunity. I have been in business all my life, and I understand how important it is to find efficiencies. However, the funding gap with England has been estimated as being somewhere close to £600 million, and it does not matter how efficient you are if you have that sort of shortfall.

Mitchel McLaughlin made a point about equality. Healthcare is provided in the first 10 years and the last 10 years of someone's life. The most vulnerable members of society rely on the Health Service. Hammering the Health Service with a cut of over £100 million at this moment is not something that I can see as having been equality impact proofed. The reality is that that requirement was made because DFP got the cash flows wrong, and we suddenly find ourselves in the House requiring a fast £400 million.

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

Mr McGimpsey: I will draw my remarks to a close by asking that the House reject these proposals because they come from a Department that is among the most inefficient in Northern Ireland.

Mrs D Kelly: As my colleague Tommy Gallagher stated at the outset, we oppose the motion. We see it as the smokescreen that it really is, intended to cover up the DUP's abysmal record on and failure in the management of the finances of Northern Ireland plc. Its lack of confidence in bringing forward a Budget or in allowing us to revise the Programme for Government speaks volumes: it is afraid to open the books and let the other parties and the public look at what is there.

I will also refer to Sinn Féin's hypocrisy in talking about equality on the day that is in it, when it is about to hand over a seat at the Executive table to the Alliance Party, thereby failing to recognise the SDLP's electoral mandate. Equality? Sinn Féin could not even spell it.

We all know that health inequalities are, by and large, a result of poverty. Report after report tells us that poverty is one of the root causes of health inequalities. Which Department is responsible for tackling poverty and drawing up the action plans? OFMDFM. That is another failure of Sinn Féin and the DUP. Mr McCarthy talked about the cost of the division and sectarianism that remain in our midst. Those put a strain on all our budgets because they are not being tackled. Which Department has responsibility for cohesion, sharing and integration? OFMDFM. That is another failure of Sinn Féin and the DUP to deliver for all the people of Northern Ireland. Same old, same old.

The Health Minister, speaking as a private Member, was right to point out that none of the contributors from the opposite Benches mentioned the hard work of nurses, social workers and all the ancillary staff right across the North who worked so hard to deliver for our people during some of the worst years of conflict. We saw in other reports how our staff are working under enormous strain, not only where budget constraints are concerned. Those reports have shown that their productivity has gone up by some 7%. At a time of some of the most challenging financial and economic constraints, they are working harder and for longer.

My own trust — the Southern Health and Social Care Trust — recently won a UK award for driving forward efficiency savings. As a constituent of an area covered by that trust, you may have been aware of that, Mr Deputy Speaker. Those efficiency savings did not impact adversely on front line services. Time and time again, the SDLP has made the point that front line services must be protected.

In bringing the motion to the Floor, Mr Hamilton and the DUP have displayed cynicism, because only the SDLP voted against the Budget in the Chamber. *[Interruption.]* For Members who do not seem to be able to listen to what I have to say, I repeat: only the SDLP voted against the Budget.

The loudest squeals and shouts now are from the Sinn Féin Members, because they know that they voted in favour of the cuts, and now they are trying to dress them up as efficiency savings. With their partners in government in the DUP, Sinn Féin Members are trying to go after the Health Minister, because, over the next few weeks, they do not want to be knocking doors and having to admit that their Budget and Programme for Government are decimating our healthcare. Services in the community — particularly those for our older people, who are among the most vulnerable in our society — are being reduced and cut because of Sinn Féin and the DUP.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I want to try to get to the bottom of what Dolores is saying. She talked about cuts and efficiencies, but does she not recognise that her own

Minister removed the strategic guidelines on the allocation of social housing, which were an equality mechanism for people in Belfast? That happened on her Minister's watch. Therefore, the party that calls itself the champion of civil rights has a Minister who removed equality for people. That is the legacy of Dolores's party, and it has nothing to do with efficiency.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind all Members that the motion is about government efficiency.

Mrs D Kelly: We have heard absolute nonsense from Sinn Féin Members, who now claim to be the leaders of the civil rights movement. That is a load of nonsense; all historians know that the facts speak for themselves.

We reject the motion and see it for what it is. Money could be saved, and efficiency savings could be made. For example, what has been the cost to the public purse of the recent events at Hillsborough Castle? Those talks were held because Sinn Féin and the DUP could not get enough clarity on the provisions in the St Andrews Agreement. We now have St Andrews mark II. What has been the cost of that? We also have Sinn Féin bowing to the DUP on the allocation of the justice ministry, abandoning the principles of equality and power sharing and assisting the Alliance Party in its power grab for that ministry.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members of a ruling made by the Speaker on 24 November 2009 in which he said that he would judge Members' remarks against standards of "courtesy, good temper and moderation."

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): I am glad that I have been called at this point in the debate, because it was going rapidly downhill. The rant by the previous Member who spoke included references to power grabs by the Alliance Party, a betrayal of equality by Sinn Féin, inefficiency by the DUP in the running of the Budget, and the Health Minister not addressing the issues that he should — everything except the subject of the motion.

I do not want to spend too much time discussing the matter, but I will say one thing: the Budget is the responsibility of every party. The Budget that we are going to live with next year, despite the rant by Mrs Kelly, was endorsed by every party in the Assembly and in the Executive, including the SDLP, the Ulster Unionists and Sinn Féin —

Mrs D Kelly: That is not true.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: From a sedentary position, the Member is saying that my comments are not true. All she needs to do is get a copy of the minutes from the relevant Executive meeting. I do not think that even her own Minister would have the barefaced cheek to deny that she had

an input into the Budget and that she accepted it. I do not want to get into that issue, because I want to move on to the issues that we are meant to be talking about.

All the parties in the Assembly have recognised the importance of adequately funding the Health Service. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is a very busy man. Even though he took part in the debate, he had to leave before the end of it, although he did not listen to the first or last part of it. I am sure that Members are pleased that he graced us with his presence today. In his ministerial role, he often could not find the time to be accountable to the Assembly because he was fighting swine flu and Lord knows what other diseases.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Minister that he is responding to the debate on efficiency.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I was about to respond to the comments of a Member who had taken part; I wanted to provide a bit of context.

In 2007, the Minister said — do not forget that this was the baseline for health — that he had got a good deal for health. Indeed, the spending increase over the three years amounted to 3·8% for the Department of Health, as opposed to 3·3% on average for other Departments. That was recognition of its importance. I remind the House that the latest budget reductions did not come about because DFP took its eye off the cash-flow ball — whatever that may mean; I do not have a clue what he was talking about — the reductions came about because the Executive and the Assembly decided collectively to defer water charges, to implement equal pay and to help small businesses and householders to pay their rates. There were costs attached to those measures, and, therefore, the budget had to be redistributed.

Mr McNarry: Rubbish.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member may say “rubbish”, but it is a fact. The cost of those measures was laid down, the gap in the Budget was identified, and money had to be redistributed.

Mr McNarry: Who brought the ideas to waive water charges and so on to the Assembly and the Executive? Did you not bring those ideas to the House after calculating the cost?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Perhaps the Member forgets his party's manifesto, which committed him to that. He voted for it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: All remarks must be made through the Chair.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Even with that, the reduction in the health budget was the lowest of all reductions. Other Members said that various reports, including the Appleby report, said that

the Health Service in Northern Ireland was not severely under-resourced. We should not run away with the idea that the Health Department has not been given priority in the Programme for Government and in the Budget; it has.

I will consider some of the arguments that were made. Why was DHSSPS singled out in the motion? The proposer of the motion can explain that later. PEDU has been with the Department of the Environment; I invited it in when I was Minister of the Environment. As a result of its constructive work and the follow-up work, which was a combination of PEDU working with departmental officials, the processing time for planning applications was significantly reduced. The targets, which had not been met in three years, were achieved and there were significant improvements.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No; you had a rant during your chance to speak. Had your contribution been constructive, I would have been happy to take questions from you. If you did not have the time then, you do not have it now.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind all Members to address all questions through the Chair and not to engage in toing and froing.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Secondly, PEDU considered Land and Property Services, which is part of a Department that is run by a DUP Minister. It produced a useful report, which is now being implemented. Mr McNarry asked about LPS. It was recognised that LPS had problems. However, the difference is that DUP Ministers welcome the fact that a resource is available to deal with problems when they arise in their Department.

I suppose that the motion would never have been tabled had the Health Minister accepted the offer that I made to him on 10 November 2009.

3.30 pm

I do not wish to impose PEDU on anyone. It is much better if PEDU can collaborate and co-operate with Departments. On two occasions, I have seen how PEDU's work can assist a Minister when there are problems in his or her Department.

I do not think that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has been unnecessarily targeted. A number of Members have asked why I wrote to the Minister on 10 November 2009 to outline why his Department might benefit from PEDU. Mr McLaughlin tried to puncture the balloon of unionist unity by saying that there was a motive behind the letter that was more about sniping and partisanship than about being helpful. I wrote to the Health Minister because every Department is expected to find 3% efficiency savings. By and large, all Ministers have got

on with that job, and, as I have reported here on a number of occasions at Question Time, those efficiency targets are being met.

Time and time again, however, in the Assembly and in public, the Health Minister has been the only one to say that he is finding it difficult to meet the efficiency targets. The others said that they were finding it difficult, yet they got on with it. They did not complain, nor did they make a public issue out of the situation. The Health Minister did, and for that reason I invited him, in a spirit of helpfulness, to use the available resource that is the performance and efficiency delivery unit. I recognised its value, and other Ministers, had they looked at PEDU, would have recognised its value as well.

I like Mr McNarry's debating style. It is a kind of skinhead bootboy debating style, which I always enjoy. It is my style, too. In order to deflect criticism from the real core issue, Mr McNarry really got down to it. He said that the letter was a calculated insult, and that it amounted to carping about the Health Service. Let us look at the evidence. I do not want to get into detail about reports, but three — the Appleby report, the report of the departmental productivity working group and the Nuffield Trust report — have already indicated that there are problems in the Health Service in Northern Ireland. Members have quoted from those reports, and I will not repeat them. However, the reports highlighted issues such as staffing, administration, the amount of money that is spent per head, and dissatisfaction with service.

The Minister said that the figures relating to those issues were out of date. Had he read the Nuffield Trust report, he would know that it is not four years out of date. Its figures are for 2008 to 2010, so if there is a four-year gap, my maths must be wrong. The Nuffield Trust report quoted the 2008 figures for waiting times, so it is not four years out of date but fairly up to date. All those reports highlighted issues that cannot be ignored.

Let us consider what the Minister has said about his Department and how his Department makes decisions. When speaking in Committee on 15 October 2009 on the investment in 200 new respite care places, he said:

"I am reviewing the situation with respite care".

Listen to this and tell me whether this is not a Department that needs some extra focus. The Minister continued:

"no one is clear about what exactly we are doing or where the need lies."

That hardly strikes me as a comment that a Minister would make about a Department that is totally on top of what it needs to do and how it needs to use resources. I could give Members other quotations.

All that I am saying is that there are independent reports. Are they all levelling calculated insults at

nursing staff, hard-working auxiliary staff, or the staff in the Health Service? Is the Minister doing that? I do not think so. Those reports simply accept that there is always room for improvement in any large organisation that employs more than 100,000 people, spends £4.3 billion, and has a lot of competing needs and layers of management. The whole point of bringing in PEDU is to help to zone in on some of those areas, and to give direction to what the Minister wants to do. I want to see, as I am sure does the Minister, the money that he has available spent as efficiently as possible.

The argument was made that the Department of Finance and Personnel should not impose PEDU on the Department of Health. The Minister said that that demand came from the most inefficient of all Departments. He produced no evidence for such alleged inefficiency. Unlike Mr McGimpsey, however, if he has evidence of inefficiency in my Department, I would be the first to address it, to find an answer and to remedy it.

I have said time and again, and this is where I differ from part of the emphasis of the motion, that the best way forward is for Ministers to invite PEDU to do its work, and to co-operate with it. There is no point in PEDU going in and having to dig for information because a Minister and Department do not want to provide it. That work can be done effectively only if there is a willingness to surrender the information that is required so that an assessment can be made of what can be done. I would prefer that we address the issue in that way.

The debate has, at times, been contentious and not very helpful. Sometimes, the attitude in the Assembly, and of the Minister, has not helped. I want to make sure that health is adequately provided for and that, when money goes to health, it is properly spent. That is why I am not imposing PEDU on the Minister, but inviting him to bring it in. PEDU did a good job in the Department of Finance and Personnel and in the Department of the Environment, and can do the same job to help the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr Weir: Although the argument has been won on this side of the House, it is, sadly, clear that the vote has not been won. I suspect that there may be limited purpose in efforts to persuade recalcitrant Members to undergo a last-minute Damascene conversion and see the merits of the motion.

Mr Hamilton said at the outset of the debate that there was a danger of health debates being marked by a puerile or childish attitude. The debate was a mixed bag. There were sensible contributions and good points well made. At other times, it went, as the Minister of Finance and Personnel put it, rapidly downhill. I have in mind the image of the same sort of speed as a downhill skier.

Mr Hamilton, in proposing the motion, said that we should all share the aims of the motion. There are a number of reasons for the motion. Why should PEDU look at the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in particular, and why is the motion phrased as it is? As the Minister pointed out, there are issues about a number of other important spending areas, and other Ministers have shown willingness to invite PEDU in. However, for some reason, the Department of Health has shown resistance. It would be valuable for PEDU to have input on issues that are dealt with by the Department of Health, because, as has been highlighted, that Department spends roughly 50% of the Budget. If there is merit in examining only one area to get efficiencies and value for money, the area to be examined should be the Department of Health.

We want to see PEDU involved because we are all acutely aware of the importance of health. We realise the need to protect the weak and the vulnerable and to try to protect front line services, as all parties said. Why is there a resistance to the involvement of PEDU and attempts to see how systems can be changed beyond just the general administrative efficiencies? PEDU should take a radical look at the Health Service and suggest what changes can be made so that we can have the best possible protection for our front line services. That is an issue that we should all unite on.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member acknowledge that the establishment of PEDU was based on the principle that governs the Number 10 policy unit, which operates in Departments at the invitation of those Departments? Will he accept that motions that are aimed at bashing the Department of Health, which are tabled almost weekly by the DUP, are not conducive to enabling such work? Will he reflect upon the attitudes of his party, and will he agree that it is important to reflect the significant increases in health demands?

Last week, I visited a health trust that has experienced 7% and 9% increases in accident and emergency visits and outpatients' attendance respectively. There has been no reflection of that additional workload in any of his comments.

Mr Weir: I am sure that the Member always gives the House much to reflect on.

A number of areas are causing pressure on the Budget. I wish for the Department of Health to engage with PEDU and to invite it in. If that were to happen, there would be no need for a motion of this nature. The pressures that are faced by the Department of Health are all the more reason for PEDU's involvement. A finite amount of money is available in the Budget, although undoubtedly, even if we spent every penny that we had on health, pressures would still emerge. In dealing with the pressures, it is important that we get the best possible service, value for money and maximum

health spend directed towards front line services. That is why PEDU should be involved. I am concerned, because it is a no-brainer.

Mr Hamilton stated that there is an inevitably emotional response when dealing with health issues. That is only natural. However, when we consider statistics that compare here with England, we see that we do not get the same quality of delivery in the outcomes from our Health Service. However, I do appreciate some of the caveats.

In days of financial constraint and in circumstances in which the Budget is under pressure because of the avoidance of water charges, which all parties supported in their manifestos, there will be increasing pressures. Consequently, we need to have a clear-cut and radical look at better performance management. Mr Hamilton stated that the Health Department is too close to the issues to be able to consider what major changes should take place, although that would be true of any Department. He also said that management costs rose by 13% in the first year of the trusts. That is fundamentally worrying. We should be looking at a driver for efficiencies.

Although he did not support the motion, Mitchel McLaughlin indicated the need to respond to the economic circumstances, and he described the need to try to ensure that front line services are protected as much as possible as the defining issue. At least he acknowledged that there is some opportunity to find additional efficiencies. Consequently, I agree that PEDU has implications for the whole Executive. Unfortunately, some in the Department seem to regard PEDU as a threat. PEDU should be regarded as a resource rather than a threat.

3.45 pm

David McNarry, indulging in a bit of paranoia, regards the motion as some sort of calculated insult. However, we tried to focus the debate on practical measures rather than insults. I appreciate that a lot of the debates in the Chamber can turn into knockabout, and both Mr McNarry and I are guilty of that sometimes.

Mr McNarry: Never.

Mr Weir: There is some revisionist history coming from those Benches.

Opposing the motion, Mr Gallagher outlined his worry about cuts being imposed on front line services because it would be the weak and the vulnerable who would suffer. However, that is the very reason why the motion was put forward. Comparisons with social services are made with the exclusion of some figures, so there is not that sort of problem. The line that the SDLP voted against the Budget was trotted out again. However, the SDLP Minister supported both the main Budget and the revised Budget. Therefore, the SDLP's

almost Pontius Pilate-like washing of hands is somewhat regrettable.

Kieran McCarthy indicated sympathy for the motion and the strains on the Budget. However, I will be keen to read the Hansard report of the debate, because his contribution left me with a slightly confused picture. On the one hand, he said that more money should go in but, on the other, he realistically accepted that money cannot be ring-fenced. Although it is worthwhile to look at the costs of division again, it seems to be regarded as the golden penny to fund just about everything at all times. Jim Shannon contrasted our position with that of the Republic of Ireland and highlighted the vital role that the pharmaceutical industry can play. He also made some practical suggestions.

Although not speaking in his role as Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey, whose contribution to the debate was welcome, launched an attack on Simon Hamilton. That surprised me — well, perhaps I was not that surprised — because I am not clear that Mr McGimpsey was in the Chamber for much of Mr Hamilton's contribution; perhaps he watched it from another vantage point. I ask the Minister what he has to fear from PEDU and urge him to take a better look at the situation.

Dolores Kelly made a wide-ranging speech, which, at times, concentrated principally on the evils of the DUP and Sinn Féin and on a Sinn Féin/SDLP battle. She touched on the subject of health occasionally, but there is not a great deal that I can say in relation to that. The Minister highlighted the fact that the Budget had been endorsed by all parties. I appreciate that the Minister did not endorse it, but it has been endorsed by all parties. Therefore, no one can pretend that it is the child of one party or another. Furthermore, the Health Department received the lowest budget cut in percentage terms.

PEDU has been helpful in other areas, and I believe that it can contribute to driving greater efficiencies in the health system by taking a much more radical look at it. It will hopefully ensure that there is room for improvement. The focus should be on front line services; all of the House should unite around that. More in hope than expectation, I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and negatived.

Adjourned at 3.49 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 2 February 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: Considering the nature of the business and the Bill this morning, it is important that Members of this House declare that they are members of local government. The onus is on Members to make those declarations.

I call on the Minister of the Environment to move the Consideration Stage of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

Moved — [The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]

Clause 1 (Functions to include power to enter contracts)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 1, line 19, leave out subsection (3) and insert

“(3) A provision of this Part does not apply to a contract which a district council enters into before the commencement of that provision.”

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2: In clause 2, page 2, line 26, leave out from beginning to “case,” in line 28. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]*

No 6: In clause 16, page 10, line 23, at end insert

“() the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions)(Northern Ireland) Order 2002 (NI 3);” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]*

No 9: After clause 17 insert

“CHAPTER 5

POWER TO MODIFY LEGISLATION

Power to modify legislation in connection with local government re-organisation

—(1) The Department may by regulations make such modifications of local government or rating legislation as in the opinion of the Department are necessary or expedient for the purpose of preparing for, or giving full effect to, the reorganisation of local government provided for by the Local Government (Boundaries) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 (c. 7).

(2) In this section ‘local government legislation’ and ‘rating legislation’ have the meanings given by section 16(2).” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]*

At the outset, I declare an interest. A number of the amendments arise from recommendations that were made by the Committee for the Environment during the Bill’s Committee Stage. I thank the Environment Committee for its very helpful recommendations and for its timely consideration of the Bill.

The first group of amendments is mainly technical in nature and tidies up loose ends. The amendments do not involve any change of policy. Amendment No 1 concerns the commencement of provisions in relation to contracts of councils. When the Bill was originally drafted, it was envisaged that local government waste management groups may have been in a position shortly thereafter to enter into significant waste infrastructure contracts. Therefore, clause 1(3) was drafted to enable any contract that was entered into by a district council or waste management group after the date on which the Bill was introduced to the Assembly, which was 22 June 2009, to be a certified contract under Part 1 of the Bill, provided that the certification requirements mentioned in clause 3 were satisfied within six weeks of the Bill coming into operation.

Those waste infrastructure contracts are not now expected to be entered into until later this year at the earliest. Therefore, the existing provision in clause 1(3) is no longer necessary. In Committee, the Environment Committee recommended that it be amended. I agree with that recommendation. The proposed amendment provides that the Part 1 provisions will apply only to contracts entered into after the provisions have commenced.

A knock-on effect of that amendment is that the provision in clause 2(5), which requires a six-week certification period for contracts entered into before the commencement of the Bill, is no longer needed. Therefore, I propose to amend clause 2(5) to provide that in relation to a council contract the certification period means a six-week period from the date that the council entered into the contract.

I move on to amendment No 6. Clause 16(1) provides that regulations made by my Department in relation to the constitution and functions of statutory transition committees may provide for any local government or rating legislation that applies to existing councils to apply, with or without modifications, to statutory transition committees or not to apply to existing councils.

Clause 16(2) defines local government legislation. The proposed amendment extends the definition to include the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 2002, which enables my Department to pay general grants to councils. I propose to include that Order in the definition of local government legislation so that, if necessary, my Department may make payments of general grant to statutory transition committees before the new councils are formed.

I come to the final amendment in this group. The power currently provided for in clause 16 will permit my Department to amend rating legislation only in relation to existing councils and the statutory transition committees. However, a recent review of rating legislation, which was conducted jointly by my Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel, highlighted the fact that, during the transitional reorganisation phase, it will be necessary to amend rating legislation in relation to the new councils as well as existing councils and the statutory transition committees. The amendment, which would insert a new clause after clause 17, will provide such a power and ensure a smooth transition of responsibility for the calculation and setting of district rates. Those are the group 1 amendments.

Mr Speaker: Before inviting the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment to address group 1 amendments, I remind Members that there are three groups of amendments. We will debate each group in turn. The first debate will be on amendment Nos 1, 2, 6 and 9, which deal with the commencement of certain provisions and powers to amend legislation. The second debate will be on amendment Nos 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8, which deal with the statutory transition committees and severance payments to councillors. The third debate will be on amendment Nos 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14, which deal mainly with giving councils additional waste management powers.

I remind Members who intend to speak during the debate that they should address all the amendments in each group on which they wish to comment. When the initial debate on each group is completed, any substantive amendments in that group will be moved formally as we go through the Bill, and the Question on each will be put without further debate. The Question on clauses to stand part will be put at the appropriate points of the Bill. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mrs D Kelly): I declare an interest as a member of Craigavon Borough Council and of the transition committee of which Craigavon is a part.

On behalf of the Environment Committee, I welcome the Consideration Stage of the Bill, which addresses several issues that need to be resolved in

order to bring about the RPA process in relation to local government. The Bill will clarify the powers of district councils to enter into long-term service contracts with the private sector; enable councils to acquire land other than by agreement for waste management purposes; and make preliminary arrangements for the reorganisation of local government. It will also establish statutory transition committees for the purpose of preparing for and giving full effect to the reorganisation of local government, and it will enable the Department to make regulations to provide for severance payments to be made to councillors who resign during a specified period.

The Bill was referred to the Committee on 1 July 2009. Members were acutely aware of the need to progress the legislation quickly and to keep the Committee Stage as short as possible, while still conducting the necessary detailed scrutiny, making recommendations and prompting amendments where it was deemed necessary. The good working relationship that was established between the Committee and departmental officials helped the process and paid dividends when it came to agreeing recommendations on amendments.

However, there are two issues that I want to mention. First, the Committee, having been asked to report quickly on the Bill, did so in 33 days, so it is disappointing that more than three months elapsed until the Bill reached Consideration Stage. Secondly, although the Minister informed the Committee that he would take all its recommendations on board, in light of the time that it has taken for the Bill to reach Consideration Stage, it would have helped the Committee to have had copies of the amendments in order to consider them in detail, rather than getting them through normal Assembly channels, which left insufficient time.

Furthermore, before I talk specifically about the amendments, I wish to point out that, throughout its evidence sessions, the Committee heard local councils stress the importance of consultation on the secondary legislation that will flow from the Bill. The Committee wholeheartedly agrees, and it urges the Department to be mindful of that point when implementing the Bill.

I shall now comment on the first group of amendments, which are technical in nature. In its report on the Bill, the Committee recommended that the legislation would be improved by the exclusion of clause 1(3). Members felt that making Part 1 applicable on a date several months before the Bill will be enacted would be inappropriate, and I welcome amendment No 1, as outlined by the Minister, which will address that discrepancy.

In Committee, the Department advised the Committee of its intention to propose amendment No 2, which the Committee accepts.

Amendment No 9 proposes that, after clause 17, a new clause should be inserted that grants the “Power to modify legislation”, which the Committee welcomes.

On 9 December 2009, the Minister wrote to the Committee to advise members that the Minister of Finance and Personnel was seeking an amendment to the Bill with respect to rating. The Committee has been particularly concerned about the impact of some elements of the Bill on ratepayers, so it queried the exact nature of that amendment. The Committee was reassured by the Minister’s reply, which indicated that the amendment would provide for the smooth transition of responsibility for calculating and setting the district rate and that any legislation under that provision would be subject to affirmative resolution. However, I shall refer to the relevant amendment later.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an Bhille. I shall speak in favour of the Bill, and I echo the Chairperson’s commendation of the work of the Committee.

I welcome the opportunity to speak at Consideration Stage, which will form a central plank in determining how local government reforms impact on councils. The Committee’s aim throughout its scrutiny of the Bill was to ensure that it brought acceptable legislation to the Chamber so that local government will be equipped to deliver for local communities when reorganisation and the transfer of powers finally come about.

The amendments in group 1 and group 2 relate to technical issues, including powers to enable councils to enter into long-term service contracts with the private sector, thus ensuring that, in the future, councils will comply with relevant regulations and will discharge council functions that ultimately benefit ratepayers. Amendment Nos 6 and 9 will give powers to the Department to amend and modify regulations, particularly with regard to rating. Given the concerns that were raised in Committee about how such regulations might affect ratepayers, those powers must be welcomed. We believe that the amendments will be welcomed by all at council level, because they will afford local authorities that are involved in the transfer of local government powers an opportunity to plan ahead with certainty at an early stage and to deliver council functions efficiently and effectively.

Mr Beggs: I, too, welcome the Bill’s progress to Consideration Stage. There are some important aspects of the Bill, particularly for waste management and for the ability of local authorities to enter into long-term contracts, which, ultimately, will benefit ratepayers. We have to keep our focus on that aspiration. In addition, the new transition committees will be given

powers to assist in as smooth a transfer under the RPA process as possible. Although the Ulster Unionist Party indicated its preference for a shadow model, that did not reflect the view of the Assembly. Therefore, we are trying to work constructively to see that there is a need for the transitionary process.

I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council, and I wish to put on record that my dad is a member of Larne Borough Council. It is appropriate that I declare those interests.

10.45 am

I support amendment No 1, because there is no logic in having the date 22 June 2009 in the Bill. That date merely reflects the delays in the reorganisation process, and it has now been superseded by a considerable distance.

I support amendment No 2. In Committee, there was no argument about why the six-week period should be entered into for extending the certification period.

I support amendment No 6, which is a technical adjustment to ensure that the Bill is more complete.

Amendment No 9 is a significant new amendment. Like the Chairperson of the Committee, I would have preferred to have had more time to consider it in Committee. It contains some sweeping powers, with wording such as:

“The Department may by regulations make such modifications of local government or rating legislation as in the opinion of the Department are necessary”.

Like the Committee Chairperson and other members of the Committee, I seek the Minister’s assurance that that power will be exercised using the affirmative resolution process, so that it can be clearly seen that balanced decisions are being made and so that there will be support in the Assembly for such changes before they are introduced. I understand that, when we go through such a sweeping reorganisation process, issues may arise that need to be dealt with, and I see that provision as being enabling legislation for that to happen. Therefore, I seek confirmation that the affirmative resolution method will be used.

It would also be helpful if the Minister could give us some examples of why the new clause is needed. Ultimately, I would be content with the amendment if there is an affirmative resolution process and the provision is exercised in appropriate circumstances.

Mr Ford: At the outset, I declare an interest as a serving member of Antrim Borough Council. I am not sure how many times I have declared that or whether it is a public secret, but I will at least get it on the record for this debate.

As a member of the Environment Committee, I think that it is rather unfortunate that, frequently, when

we debate legislation, the only Members who speak at Consideration Stage are those who have been members of the relevant Committee and will have had all kinds of discussions about it anyway. Nevertheless, as a member of the Committee, I welcome the willingness of the Minister's officials to engage with us on the detail of a number of matters.

As somebody who has been connected with other aspects of politics over the past week or so and has referred to the difficulties of actually getting any real business done in the Chamber, I acknowledge that we are doing real business this morning. We are carrying out our legislative responsibilities and following up on work that was done, as the Chairperson said, expeditiously but, nonetheless, effectively by the Committee some time ago. The Committee and the officials concerned should pat one another on the back for managing to achieve that much. The Speaker may tell me off for straying too far at this point, but that particularly applied to some of the issues that we will be considering in the next stage of the debate, given that there were extended discussions about items such as transition committees.

As the Chairperson said, it is a regret that we did not see the full wording of the Minister's amendments in time for the Committee to give proper consideration to them, especially given the time that expired between the Committee preparing its report and Consideration Stage. Nonetheless, we must deal with the amendments that are presented to the House today.

I believe that I highlighted in Committee and possibly at Second Stage that, as it stands, clause 1(3) facilitates an extremely dubious process by which it may or may not be possible to backdate retrospective approval to a particular date. It is entirely dubious to tell any public body — local council or otherwise — that a contract that is, at this point, *ultra vires* could become *intra vires* if the Bill in its current form were passed by the Assembly. I am not quite sure how legislative draftsmen got to that particular point. However, I welcome the fact that views that were expressed have been taken on board and that that provision is to be removed.

It is one thing to say, as amendment No 1 does, that a contract can be backdated to before the commencement of the provision after the Bill has become an Act; it is another thing entirely to pick a date — some date in history — and to suggest to councils that they might do something illegal but could get away with it if the law is changed as they had hoped. I welcome the fact that subsection (3) has been addressed.

Amendment Nos 2 and 6 are, relatively speaking, consequential, tidying-up matters that do not require particular discussion.

I agree entirely with Mr Beggs's point, and I will certainly seek the Minister's assurance that

amendment No 9, which introduces a new clause, conveys powers that are so significant that it would not be acceptable if they were approved by any means other than affirmative resolution in the House. Given the relatively sweeping nature of the proposed new clause to be inserted after clause 17, it must not simply be dealt with under the normal method for approving regulations, which go solely to the Committee for approval and not to the House. I trust that the Minister will give the House that assurance. I welcome the progress that we have made so far.

The Minister of the Environment: I thank Members for their comments thus far. The Committee Chairperson indicated that there is a degree of unhappiness that the Bill was not brought to the Assembly sooner, given the Committee's response time. I assure the Chairperson that that problem did not emanate from the Department of the Environment. I have pressed for all legislation that deals with local government to be brought to the House so that MLAs can hear it, consider it and have as great an opportunity as possible to test it rigorously and fully. At no point have I been responsible for any delay in bringing any of that legislation to the House.

I will continue to ensure that reform of local government remains high on the Executive's agenda. I trust that, when matters are resolved fully and properly, there will be a much smoother flow of business in the House. If there is not and the Assembly does not carry out more work, that will damage its credibility in the public eye. I for one do not want to be associated with an Executive and an Assembly that do not work as well as they should do.

Members raised a number of issues. The Department commenced consultation on proposed regulations on 2 November 2009. Comments were due to be received by 29 January 2010. Proposed regulations will, among other things, require a council, if entering into a certified contract, to issue a copy of the certificate to a local government auditor and to each person with whom the council has entered into the contract and to ensure that the certificate that is issued is signed by the council's chief finance officer. My Department will take on board the comments that it received in response to its consultation document. It will bring regulations into operation as soon as possible after Royal Assent.

The detail of severance arrangements for councillors will be set out in subordinate legislation. I intend to carry out full consultation on those arrangements. If statutory transition committees are to be able to carry out functions that are required of them, it will not be possible to consult on subordinate legislation for them because they need to be established as soon as possible.

In response to the issue that Mr Ford and Mr Beggs raised, I say that the power that is currently provided in

chapter 3 of the Bill permits the Department to make amendments only to rating legislation for existing councils and statutory transition committees. The review of the rating legislation, which was carried out by my Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel, highlighted the requirement to make amendments in relation to the new councils, existing councils and the statutory transition committees during the transitional reorganisation phase. The legislation made under that power can and will provide for a smooth transition of responsibility for the calculation and setting of the district rate. It is proposed that any legislation brought under that provision will be subject to draft affirmative procedure in the Assembly.

I trust that Members are content with how I dealt with that matter. They have full trust in the existing Minister of the Environment, but Ministers change from time to time. Members rightly sought the application of both belt and braces, in case the future brings a less benign Minister to the office.

Amendment No 1 agreed to.

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

Clause 2 (Certified contracts to be intra vires)

Mr Speaker: Amendment No 2 has been debated and is consequential to amendment No 1.

Amendment No 2 made: In page 2, line 26, leave out from beginning to “case,” in line 28. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).*]

Clause 2, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 3 to 12 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the second group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 3, it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 4, 5, 7 and 8. Those amendments deal with statutory transition committees and severance payments to councillors.

New Clause

The Minister of the Environment: I beg to move amendment No 3: After clause 12, insert the following new clause

“Referral to Department where consent refused or granted subject to conditions

— (1) This section applies where—

(a) the consent of a statutory transition committee is required in relation to a proposed disposal or contract of an existing council; and

(b) that consent is refused by the statutory transition committee or is given subject to conditions.

(2) The existing council may refer the decision of the statutory transition committee to the Department.

(3) Where the decision of a statutory transition committee is referred to the Department under this section, the Department may—

- (a) confirm that decision;
- (b) if consent has been given subject to conditions, amend or revoke any such condition;
- (c) if consent has been refused, grant consent unconditionally or subject to conditions.

(4) The decision of the Department under this section in relation to any consent or conditions—

- (a) has effect for the purposes of this Chapter (except this section) as if made by the statutory transition committee; and
- (b) is final.”

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 4: In clause 14, page 9, line 11, leave out subsection (4) and insert

“(4) Those regulations shall ensure that—

(a) the statutory transition committee in relation to the new council for the district of Belfast consists of members of the predecessor council and members of Castlereagh Borough Council and Lisburn City Council;

(b) the statutory transition committee in relation to any other new council consists of members of the predecessor councils.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).*]

No 5: In clause 14, page 9, line 17, leave out ‘predecessor council’ and insert ‘council mentioned in subsection (4)’. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).*]

No 7: After clause 16, insert the following new clause

“Guidance to statutory transition committees

—(1) The Department may issue guidance to statutory transition committees as to the exercise of their functions.

(2) It is the duty of a statutory transition committee to have regard to any guidance issued by the Department.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).*]

No 8: In clause 17, page 11, line 5, at end insert

“(2A) Where the method of calculating the amount of severance payment depends on length of service, the regulations must provide that any period during which a councillor was a member of—

- (a) the Assembly, or
 - (b) the House of Commons,
- shall be disregarded.” — [*Mr Kinahan.*]

The Minister of the Environment: Clauses 10 to 13 will enable my Department to make directions to provide that an existing council will not dispose of any land or enter into any contracts above specified sums unless that council has the consent of a statutory transition committee. At Committee Stage, the Committee for the Environment recommended that an amendment be made to those provisions to provide that, where consent from a statutory transition committee is refused, the council concerned may refer the matter to my Department to consider and decide the outcome. I agree with that recommendation, and amendment No 3 will enable an existing council to refer to my

Department any matter to which its statutory transition committee did not give consent or gave consent subject to conditions. Where such referrals are made, the decision of my Department will be final.

Clause 14(4) provides that the regulations to be made by my Department to establish the statutory transition committees will ensure that the statutory transition committee for an existing council will consist of members of the predecessor council or councils. During Committee Stage, members of the Committee for the Environment pointed out that, as fairly significant areas in the existing local government districts of Castlereagh and Lisburn will transfer to the new government district of Belfast, it was important that the citizens of Castlereagh and Lisburn should have a say and be represented on the Belfast statutory transition committee. The Committee recommended that the Bill be amended to provide that the Belfast statutory transition committee should include members from Castlereagh and Lisburn councils. I agree with that recommendation, and I propose, therefore, to amend clause 14(4) to provide that my Department's regulations will ensure such representation on the Belfast statutory transition committee.

11.00 am

As a consequence of amendment No 4, I also propose to amend clause 14(5)(a). In making regulations to establish statutory transition committees and to provide for the appointment of the chairpersons and members, my Department may also legislate for the number of members to be appointed from each predecessor council and, in the case of the Belfast statutory transition committee, the number of members from Belfast City Council, Castlereagh Borough Council and Lisburn City Council.

Amendment No 7 proposes to insert a new clause after clause 16, and clauses 14 to 16 will enable my Department to make regulations to establish statutory transition committees and to set out their constitution and functions. The regulations will provide for the functions of statutory transition committees by applying, with or without modifications, local government and rating legislation that applies to existing councils.

In addition to such functions, statutory transition committees will be required to carry out other duties to prepare for and give full effect to the reorganisation of local government. For example, they will be required to appoint senior staff designate for the new councils and to carry out preparatory work in community planning. There may be occasions when it will be necessary for my Department to issue guidance to statutory transition committees when carrying out such functions. Amendment No 7 will enable such guidance to be issued and will require statutory transition committees to have regard to that guidance.

Amendment No 8, tabled by Mr Kinahan and Mr McCallister, would provide that, where the calculation of a severance payment to a councillor depends on the length of his or her service, the regulations providing for severance payments to be made must provide that any period when the councillor was an Assembly Member or a member of the House of Commons will not be counted. I agree with that proposal, but I will wish to amend it to include any period when a councillor was a member of the European Parliament. I propose, therefore, to forward that amendment to be tabled at Further Consideration Stage. I will also require clarity from those Members as to whether the amendment includes the 1982 to 1986 Assembly or the bodies that sat from 1973 to 1975.

That concludes my explanation of the proposed amendments in group 2.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: As the Minister said, the second group of amendments relates to reorganisation and, more specifically, to statutory transition committees and severance payments.

Amendment No 3, which inserts a new clause after clause 12, is generally welcomed by the Committee. In its report, members agreed to recommend an amendment to the Bill to allow for an appeals mechanism through which councils could challenge decisions made by statutory transition committees where there was disagreement. The Department indicated that it would be willing to introduce an amendment to that effect. Therefore, it is good to see that that recommendation has been taken on board.

I referred earlier to the lack of communication on the detail of the amendments coming to the Committee in sufficient time to allow us to consider them. It would have been helpful and constructive for the Committee to have had an opportunity to debate amendment No 3, and I regret that the Department did not make that possible. I note the Minister's desire to have other legislation on the review of public administration before the House at an earlier opportunity than has been the case to date.

The Committee also welcomes amendment Nos 4 and 5. At Committee Stage, members expressed concern that although clause 14, as drafted, provides clear guidance on the membership of the statutory transition committees for most of the new councils, it is ambiguous on the statutory transition committee for the new greater Belfast council. As Members know, that statutory transition committee is not being created but is subsuming areas of two other existing councils, Lisburn City Council and Castlereagh Borough Council. Consequently, members stressed the importance of ensuring that citizens from those areas are represented adequately on the Belfast statutory transition committee.

I note that the Committee also raised that concern about clause 9, but it recognised that the amendments to clause 14 address the issue adequately.

Mr Weir: I declare a range of interests. I am a member of North Down Borough Council, the North Down and Ards statutory transition committee, the policy development panel A under the Department of the Environment, which has been dealing with the governance arrangements of the statutory transition committees, and vice-president of NILGA.

Having declared all those interests, I am inclined to sit down, having made a fairly lengthy speech already and having, perhaps, said more than other Members.

I want to deal with several of the amendments, all of which are to be welcomed. As a member of the Committee for the Environment, I appreciate that the Committee would have liked to have had sight of the detail of the proposed amendments as early as possible, but we should not be churlish. The proposed amendments are very sensible and reflect some of the detail that was teased out by the Committee.

Amendment No 3 deals with the referral powers of the Department. The Bill provides that the transition committees must give their approval to the disposal of land or major capital projects, and that is very sensible. I am a member of a transition committee that has a natural fit — there is a degree of harmony between North Down and Ards. However, I am aware that that may not be the case in every other part of the country. There may be disagreements between councils, or situations may arise in which councillors from outgoing councils have “legacy ambitions” and seek to leverage large amounts of expenditure into their areas, so that a wider future council will be tied in to major capital projects. The Department’s thinking is that capital projects should not be stymied, but should be judged on their own merits, irrespective of RPA. Consequently, the restriction that the Bill puts in place to ensure that the transition committees will provide a degree of sanction is very wise.

However, the flip side of that argument — and the purpose of amendment No 3 — would occur if a transition committee unjustly tried to hold back the disposal of land or a capital project. One can envisage a scenario in which councils with different opinions could get into a tit-for-tat situation:

“we won’t approve your sale of this if you don’t approve our sale of the other.”

The mathematics of many of the transition committees means that there is a danger of gamesmanship, localism or parochialism, which goes against the spirit of trying to move forward with RPA. Consequently, having an independent appeals mechanism to the Department, with the Department deciding whether particular actions

can take place, is a sensible way forward. Therefore, I welcome amendment No 3.

Amendment No 4 deals with an issue that was identified by the Committee. It is an obvious, clear-cut problem that was always going to arise, and it was identified by the policy development panel quite a long time ago. Some special arrangements are needed to provide justice in the Belfast/Lisburn/Castlereagh situation. Compared with the other transition committees, that transition committee is in a unique position. All the other transitional committees are pure amalgamations of different councils. In my area, approximately 300 voters are transferring from North Down to Belfast, but the only area where significant numbers of people are affected is Belfast/Lisburn/Castlereagh. The population that will move from Lisburn City Council and Castlereagh Borough Council into the Belfast City Council area will account for one fifth or one sixth of the population of the new amalgamated area. Therefore, it would clearly not be equitable to have an equal number of representatives from each council on that transition committee, as is the case with the other committees. That would clearly be disproportionate.

However, similarly, it would be unacceptable simply to assume that Belfast should absorb territory, and leave a significant number of voters out on a limb. Consequently, the recognition that there is a need for specific regulations to address the situation in Belfast, Lisburn and Castlereagh shows a high degree of common sense.

Tough questions need to be asked about those regulations. For example, must councillors who will represent Lisburn and Castlereagh come from the areas affected, or can the council decide that they could be any representative of the new council? If, for example, people are selected from the area of Castlereagh that will be included in the Belfast council area, will that automatically exclude any councillor from that area who is from the Lisburn/Castlereagh end? Matters are not clear cut in that respect, but the broad principle that there needs to be clear representation for the people of Lisburn and Castlereagh in areas that will become part of Belfast is sensible. Regulations should be put in place, and will be welcomed by everyone across the Chamber.

Amendment No 5 is a consequential amendment, which technically flows from amendment No 4.

Amendment No 7 deals with the guidance. One of the concerns that we have had in the policy development panel is the extent to which some of the transition committees have almost run off on their own remit. Some transition committees seem very reluctant to move on anything, and have done very little, whereas some of the voluntary transition committees have started to move at pace, and to deal with issues that are rightly

the responsibility of statutory transition committees. Some voluntary transition committees have even considered issues that will actually be within the remit of successor councils. It is important that there be a degree of guidance.

At an earlier stage in the debate, Mr Dallat raised a concern about the need to ensure that there are minority protections — I thought that he would suddenly pay attention to what I am saying. That concern cuts both ways. Nationalists who will be living in council areas that are overwhelmingly unionist will want to ensure that there is protection for them, and the flip side is true: unionists who will be living in overwhelmingly nationalist areas will want to ensure that they are properly protected. There has been a considerable amount of work done on that issue, and there has been cross-party agreement in the policy development panels and the strategic leadership board to ensure a level of governance arrangements that will provide protections for everyone.

It seems to me that if there is a degree of uniform regulation and protection in relation to governance and a range of other issues in any new council system, to give a statutory transition committee carte blanche to do whatever it likes until that point does not make a great deal of sense. Consequently, the Department giving clear-cut guidance to the statutory transition committees on that range of issues, which will be relatively detailed, makes sense.

Finally, like the Minister, I welcome the proposals in amendment No 8, which represents a sensible compromise. When councils held discussions about severance, particularly how it affected MLAs, two quite divergent views emerged. One view — sometimes held by councillors who are not MLAs — is that the boys and girls up on the hill get enough, and that they should not be getting anything at all. That is a reasonable argument to make. Others have said that all councillors should be treated with equity, and that the severance package should be the same for everyone. There is merit in those arguments, but there are flaws in both. To say that an MLA, who receives a significant wage from the public purse, should simply be treated in the same way as other councillors, who are at times greatly undervalued, and have for many years worked for more or less a pittance, is wrong. On the flip side of the coin, a blanket exclusion mechanism would not take account of the fact that many Assembly Members served on councils for many years when it probably cost them money to do so. It would be fundamentally wrong if that service were to be ignored.

11.15 am

Unlike some Members, I can speak on the issue with no pecuniary interest. I was an Assembly Member before I became a councillor, so the effect of this

proposal would be to ensure that I would not receive a penny. I am sure that some Members might feel that that is merit enough for it to be passed. I genuinely think that it would be unfair and wrong to disregard Members who have given 20 or 30 years' service on a council, particularly in the cases of Members who have recently joined the House, so the amendment is a sensible way forward.

The Minister indicated that the proposal would also apply to MEPs, who are in a not dissimilar position. Only one MEP would be affected. There is a lack of clarity on that, and the proposer of the amendment may wish to clarify that. Judging by the consternation on his face when the issue was raised, the policy may have been drafted on the hoof. Everyone accepts that the amendment would cover the current Assembly, from 1998 onwards, but it is uncertain whether it would apply to the 1982-86 Assembly and other predecessor bodies of a similar nature. Consequently, I seek clarification from the proposer on that. It may be that the definition of "Assembly" needs to be tweaked at Further Consideration Stage.

On the whole, amendment No 8 is sensible, and the group of amendments enhances the Bill. I am happy to support all the amendments in the group.

Mr Boylan: We hope that the amendments will make the process for the important issue of reorganisation more open and transparent and remove the concerns that were raised in consultation with local councils. Councillors such as Peter Weir know exactly what is going on in local council chambers, and they bring that knowledge to this Chamber. Issues to do with the statutory transition committees exercised the Committee for the Environment for a while, and they will play an important role in moving the process forward. The statutory transition committees must be proportionate and representative if they are to serve the needs of whole communities, and they must make key decisions that will lead the way in delivering a model that will benefit all new council areas. That is encompassed by the amendments, which Sinn Féin supports.

We also support the amendment on severance payments. We were happy during the consultation period, and having listened to the Minister, I will seek clarification on time periods. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Kinahan: I declare an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council, although I do not have as many other things to declare as Mr Weir.

I welcome the Bill, and as my colleague from South Antrim Mr Ford did, I welcome the fact that this Building is doing business and being seen to do so. I welcome the amendments, although, as other Members said, the Committee for the Environment would have liked to have seen them first. However, the Committee understands

why they have come out a bit later. I welcome amendment No 3, which provides for referral to the Department, and the tidying-up provisions for statutory transition committees that are proposed in amendment Nos 4, 5 and 7.

As regards amendment No 8, I declare that, as a member of Antrim Borough Council, I will not take any severance pay in whatever form it comes. I hope that that allows me to discuss the matter. I would be pleased if severance pay were chosen as the way to go forward, because many councillors have served for 20 or 30 years, and they have given much of their time for no pay. They might have received expenses, and, as my colleague said, payment of a few shillings. I also remember shillings.

The point of the amendment is that they were getting no pay and no pensions. Indeed, as one or two Members pointed out, it was probably costing them to be a councillor. We should congratulate all those councillors who have worked incredibly hard over time, with much of their private life being run by their life in council.

Amendment No 8 is aimed at addressing the matter of dual mandates, which the Ulster Unionist Party wishes to see ending. To clarify, I saw the provision as being applicable to any time that anyone was a Member of the Assembly or the House of Commons when they were receiving a pension or full-time pay. Often, when someone was working as a councillor only, they could have had another job with a pension at the same time. This provision is designed for times in the Assembly — the previous one and this one — when people are earning both pensions and proper pay. I hope that that clarifies matters. We may have to tweak the amendment a little, and I would accept the tweaking. The Minister wishes to include MEPs in the amendment, and I think that that is an extremely good idea. I had missed that. I am intrigued to know why our present MEP who said that she would stand down has not as yet, but I assume that that will be dealt with in time.

Another reason for the amendment is the expenses scandal that we read about in the newspapers and the way that the public looks at us. I thought that the amendment was a chance to show that we are not just here for extra money; we are here to do things fairly, and, as I have said before, councillors have earned the money. However, they should not be paid a severance amount for any period during which they were in this Chamber, the House of Commons or, as the Minister said, the European Parliament. It is a minimum that I am addressing, and I recommend amendment No 8.

Mr Ford: I join others in welcoming, in broad terms, the amendments in this group. I will comment briefly on each of them, while giving them all the same broad welcome that others have given them.

An issue raised at Committee Stage was what might happen if there was disagreement about capital projects, either new projects or disposals, and there was a dispute in a statutory transition committee as to how predecessor councils should operate. The process has been outlined to a considerable extent by Peter Weir, and I do not propose to repeat what was said. However, it is absolutely clear that although, at this stage, some transition committees are functioning quite well — I am happy to say that the transition committee of Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Councils is one of them — others are functioning less well with less agreement. In particular, there is the prospect that one of the smaller councils in an amalgamation of three or four might well have difficulty getting agreement from members representing the other predecessor councils in a statutory transition committee for its capital plans for its remaining period.

Given that it is an entirely normal procedure that the Department has to give approval to certain matters, it is appropriate that there should be the appeal mechanism that is written into amendment No 3 to ensure that the Minister and Department are responsible for making determinations in cases in which there is a dispute in the transition committee. We should, of course, wish that that would be not the case, and we should seek the maximum possible consensus, but it would be irresponsible not to ensure that the legislation deals with the circumstances in which there is not agreement. I do not wish that we simply assume that the goodwill that Peter Weir says exists in North Down and Ards, or that I have seen in Antrim and Newtownabbey, will necessarily apply across all transition committees up to May 2011.

Therefore, amendment No 3 is to be welcomed in broad terms, and I repeat that it is unfortunate that we did not see it in full detail earlier. As it reads this morning, it appears to be a reasonable move forward, which could perhaps be addressed at Further Consideration Stage, if required.

Amendment No 4 and the consequential amendment No 5, which are designed to deal with the Belfast problem or the Lisburn/Castlereagh problem, depending on which way it is regarded, make sense in light of the discussion that the Committee had with officials. It was absolutely clear that Belfast City Council could not be regarded as other councils were. The definition in the Bill of the whole or the major part of councils merging with new councils simply did not deal with the issue of the southern and western suburbs of Belfast being included within the city for the first time.

Members highlighted some of the issues that have yet to be resolved: for example, how individual councillors may, or may not, be chosen to sit on one or other of the transition committees. To some extent, that problem is exacerbated by the fact that because of the difficulties

between the Minister, the Department, and the Executive in dealing with it, we have not yet seen the new boundaries Order in this place.

One district electoral area that is not affected by that particular boundary dispute is Castlereagh East. Two of its seven wards will move into Belfast, and the remaining five will become part of the new Lisburn and Castlereagh area. It is extremely difficult to determine how one should say, in statute, which councillors are entitled to sit on the Belfast transition committee and which on the Lisburn and Castlereagh transition committee. However, we can reasonably assume that the regulations will not allow members to serve on both transition committees and that members will, in effect, declare their future interest by putting their names forward for the committee on which they wish to sit. At least three, but potentially all four, Castlereagh DEAs may be affected by that, because the boundaries do not tie in with current wards, never mind with the current DEAs. It may, therefore, be somewhat difficult to provide statutory prescription through regulations on which members may serve on which committees. That might have to be left to the good sense that has been all pervasive in Lisburn and Castlereagh councils on recent occasions. We look forward to seeing how that is resolved.

As Peter Weir highlighted, the population of Belfast may increase by up to a fifth, and it would have been unacceptable for people from the greater Cregagh and greater Dunmurry areas not to have representation on that new transition committee. Similarly, as the Minister outlined, the ability to provide guidance to current and future councils must be replicated in amendment No 7, which deals with guidance to statutory transition committees.

I wish to refer to amendment No 8, which Danny Kinahan and John McCallister proposed. I repeat the declaration of interest that I made as a serving MLA to the Committee for the Environment. Were I to stand down from the council, I would not expect anything in the way of a severance payment. Thus unencumbered by the reservations that other Members may have, I feel entirely free to talk about the issue

Amendment No 8 refers to “the Assembly, or the House of Commons”. Clearly “the Assembly” applies to the bodies that have met in this Building at various stages and under various names since July 1998. However, the issue of severance is slightly different for those who were involved in the Assembly of 1973, the Constitutional Convention of 1975 and the Assembly of 1982. Although the Members of past mandates were remunerated, they were not paid the sort of salary that we receive, which is assessed by the independent SSRB, and they do not have the same pension arrangements as current MLAs.

Before Further Consideration Stage, the proposers of the amendment, the Minister and his officials should undertake a detailed examination of that issue. Common sense dictates that those who received a modest salary for public services in the 1970s and 1980s are in no different a position to those who received a salary from a private sector employer or an employer elsewhere in the public sector. I declare that I was a social worker during those periods.

Mr Speaker, I am sure that your officials ensured that “the Assembly” in the amendment refers specifically to the various bodies here since July 1998. If that is the case, the wording of the amendment is about right, because it distinguishes between those of us who currently receive a reasonable salary, severance and pension arrangements in this place and those who worked here in earlier decades and did not receive the same opportunities. On that basis, I am happy to support the amendment as it stands. I look forward to hearing whether others feel the need to amend it further at Further Consideration Stage.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for outlining his proposed amendments today. I am struck more by what is not included in the Bill than by what is.

Exclusivity has been the order of the day, particularly in regard to the transition committees for Lisburn City Council and Magherafelt District Council, and, for whatever reason, that has been directed principally at my party.

However, the RPA resulted in 100,000 voters being transferred from nationalist and non-single-majority councils to councils with a unionist majority and which are unionist dominated.

11.30 am

Throughout the Bill, there are no safeguards or protections against abuses or discriminatory practices for either the transition committees or the structures that should come later. Minority practices, safeguards and protections are paramount to what should be fair, open and equal local government for all who are represented in council chambers. I see no ring-fencing of equality —

Mr Weir: I appreciate the Member’s point on the wording of the legislation. However, is he somewhat reassured by the fact that, at the policy development panel and strategic board level, a range of safeguards was agreed by all five major parties and that those safeguards will form part of the governance arrangements that will protect all minorities? They will form part of the regulations, which are permitted by, and catered for in, the Bill. That was agreed by the DUP, the SDLP, Sinn Féin, the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party, and it was agreed that the regulations are the best place for those safeguards. The policy development

panel was specifically tasked with working out regulations on governance arrangements for the transition committees.

Although those specifics are not in the Bill, part of its provisions and part of amendment No 7 allow those governance arrangements, which have been agreed on entirely a cross-party basis in local government and with the involvement of the Department, to be put into regulations. I hope that that provides the Member with some comfort.

Mr McGlone: As always, I listened very carefully to what Mr Weir had to say, and I appreciate the information that he provided. However, he will appreciate that the proof of the pudding is always in the eating. I look forward to safeguards becoming manifest in legislation, so that all of us in this council chamber —

Mr Weir: Assembly Chamber.

Mr McGlone: Sorry. I look forward to safeguards becoming manifest in legislation, so that all of us in the Assembly Chamber can be assured that decision-making at local government level is done with equality for all citizens paramount. We cannot revert to the abuses of the past. The decision is too major for us to take today. I emphasise that the matter has already gone before the Equality Commission, and that, to date, the practice of some of the transition committees has not been good.

The Minister of the Environment: Following Mr Weir's initial speech in the debate, I feel that I do not need to say very much. Without any prompting, he elucidated the case very well. However, there are a number of issues to which I will respond.

Some Members complained, again, that, under the Committee structure, they have not had time to look at the amendments. I brought the Bill to the Executive two weeks ago, and I felt that bringing it to the House for debate, and moving it ahead, was important. I am criticised for moving the Bill forward, and I am criticised for not bringing it forward quickly enough. Members had their moan during the first round of amendments, which was fine. However, it begins to get boring by the second round.

It is proper and right that, following the changes to Belfast, Lisburn and Castlereagh councils, the 60,000 people who will transfer to Belfast will have representation. Mr Ford made a valid point about not legislating for the appointment of specific council members to that new council. It is better to operate by wit rather than writ and to leave room for councils to apply a degree of common sense in appointing members who reflect the views of the people from the areas that will be moved inside Belfast City Council's boundaries.

On spending, Mr Weir made the case particularly well that councils should not be inappropriately held back if they wish to carry out projects. However, it is

not appropriate for councils that wish to have some form of legacy project to pass the bill on to someone else.

There may be real difficulties among some of the councils that are represented on the transition committees. Let us be honest: not all of the transition committees are marriages made in heaven, and some of them may be more of a shotgun marriage. I have visited almost all of the transition committees, and most of them are operating fairly well. It is important that there be a fallback position and that the Department can step in, if appropriate, when the transition committees are not able to reach agreement.

Mr McGlone raised the issue of protections. I am very interested in his criticism of one particular council for using the d'Hondt mechanism. I welcome the fact that the soon-to-be deputy leader of the SDLP wishes to dissociate his party from the d'Hondt system. In the ongoing debate about policing and justice, the SDLP has been vocal in its support for the d'Hondt system, so its criticism of one council for using that system to appoint its members to a transition committee is welcome.

Mr McGlone: The SDLP was not the only organisation to raise the perception of inequity; the Equality Commission may have corroborated that perception.

The Minister of the Environment: The Member's comments on the Equality Commission's interference in the democratic process are noted. The d'Hondt mechanism was put in place, but the SDLP does not want it to be used when it does not suit its members. If that is the SDLP's new policy, we would all be interested to hear confirmation of that.

Mr Weir: Will the Minister comment on the situation at Limavady Borough Council, where the d'Hondt procedure was not used properly in the nominations to the Causeway Coast transition committee? The effect of that was a reduction in the level of unionist representation on the transition committee, even though any mathematical application of the d'Hondt system would show that to be incorrect. It seems somewhat strange that, in his decrying of representation on transition committees, the example in Limavady seemed to slip Mr McGlone's mind.

The Minister of the Environment: I thank the Member for drawing that to my attention. I am shocked, because I was always put under the impression that unionists were the people who discriminated and that nationalists were the paragons of equality. I am shocked to hear that, and I thank Mr Weir for drawing it to my attention.

In his reference to severance, Mr Ford said that only membership of the Assembly from 1998 onwards should be considered. On a number of occasions, I have been nobbled by a couple of former Members who sit on Lisburn City Council. One of those is Alderman Davis, who is most unhappy with the proposals from his

Ulster Unionist colleagues. The other is Alderman Close, who has clearly had a conversation with Mr Ford, because Mr Ford advocated a policy that will assist former Members.

Mr Ford: I wish to put on record that I have not discussed that issue with Alderman Seamus Close.

The Minister of the Environment: I am glad that the Member has confirmed that, but I can assure him that Mr Close will be very pleased with the comments made by his leader, assuming that Mr Ford is his leader.

Amendment No 3 agreed to.

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 13 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 14 (Statutory transition committees: constitution)

Amendment No 4 made: In page 9, line 11, leave out subsection (4) and insert

“(4) Those regulations shall ensure that—

(a) the statutory transition committee in relation to the new council for the district of Belfast consists of members of the predecessor council and members of Castlereagh Borough Council and Lisburn City Council;

(b) the statutory transition committee in relation to any other new council consists of members of the predecessor councils.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]*

Amendment no 5 made: In page 9, line 17, leave out “predecessor council” and insert

“council mentioned in subsection (4)”. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]*

Clause 14, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 15 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 16 (Power to modify existing legislation)

Amendment No 6 made: In page 10, line 23, at end insert

“() the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 (NI 3);”. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]*

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

New Clause

Amendment No 7 made: After clause 16, insert the following new clause

“Guidance to statutory transition committees

—(1) The Department may issue guidance to statutory transition committees as to the exercise of their functions.

(2) It is the duty of a statutory transition committee to have regard to any guidance issued by the Department.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]*

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 17 (Severance payments to councillors)

Amendment No 8 made: In page 11, line 5, at end insert

“(2A) Where the method of calculating the amount of severance payment depends on length of service, the regulations must provide that any period during which a councillor was a member of—

(a) the Assembly, or

(b) the House of Commons,

shall be disregarded.” — *[Mr Kinahan.]*

Clause 17, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Amendment No 9 made: After clause 17, insert the following new clause

“CHAPTER 5

POWER TO MODIFY LEGISLATION

Power to modify legislation in connection with local government re-organisation

—(1) The Department may by regulations make such modifications of local government or rating legislation as in the opinion of the Department are necessary or expedient for the purpose of preparing for, or giving full effect to, the reorganisation of local government provided for by the Local Government (Boundaries) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 (c. 7).

(2) In this section ‘local government legislation’ and ‘rating legislation’ have the meanings given by section 16(2).” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]*

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 18 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Mr Speaker: We now come to the third group of amendments. With amendment No 10, it will convenient to debate amendments Nos 11, 12, 13 and 14, which deal mainly with new waste management powers that will be given to councils.

The Minister of the Environment: I beg to move amendment No 10: After clause 18, insert the following new clause

“Exercise of waste management functions of councils

Exercise of waste management functions of councils

—(1) For the purposes of this section—

‘joint committee’ means a committee appointed by two or more district councils under section 19 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 (c. 9) and ‘incorporated joint committee’ means a joint committee in relation to which an order under subsection (9) of that section is in force;

‘waste management functions’ are functions exercisable by a district council or incorporated joint committee—

(a) under Part 2 of the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 (NI 19); or

(b) for the purposes of, or in connection with, the exercise of such functions;

‘waste management contract’ means a contract for the purposes of, or in connection with, the carrying out of waste management functions.

(2) A district council has power to enter into a waste management contract containing—

(a) terms under which the council guarantees, or provides warranties or indemnities in relation to, the performance by any other district council or any incorporated joint committee of its obligations under that or any other waste management contract;

(b) terms which impose joint or several liability on the council and any other district council or incorporated joint committee in respect of a breach of a term of that or any other waste management contract.

(3) Two or more district councils (‘the participating councils’) may enter into an agreement under which one of those councils (‘the lead council’) is to act on behalf, and in the name, of all the participating councils in relation to the exercise of such waste management functions of the participating councils as are specified in the agreement (‘the specified waste management functions’).

(4) Where such an agreement is in force—

(a) the lead council has all such powers as are necessary to give effect to the agreement including in particular—

(i) power to act on behalf, and in the name, of all the participating councils in relation to the exercise of the specified waste management functions;

(ii) power to exercise the specified waste management functions of other participating councils, including functions relating to acquiring and holding property, borrowing money and entering into waste management contracts;

(iii) power to receive and hold property on behalf of, and in the name of, participating councils;

(b) any other participant council has all such powers as are necessary to give effect to the agreement including in particular power—

(i) to borrow money for that purpose; and

(ii) to make payments to the lead council for that purpose.

(5) Nothing in this section is to be construed as derogating from any power of a council exercisable otherwise than by virtue of this section.”

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 11: In clause 19, page 11, line 28, at end insert

“and

(c) section (Exercise of waste management functions of councils)(1) and (2) (contracts for waste management purposes).”
— [The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]

No 12: In clause 19, page 11, line 35, at end insert

“and

(c) section (Exercise of waste management functions of councils)(1) and (2) (contracts for waste management purposes).”
— [The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]

No 13: In clause 20, page 12, line 5, after “3” insert “or 5”.
— [The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]

No 14: In the long title, after “councillors;” insert

“to make provision in relation to the exercise of waste management functions of district councils;”. — [The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]

The Minister of the Environment: Consultation on my proposals for a waste Bill commenced on 6 April 2009 and concluded on 3 July 2009. There was significant support from consultees for additional measures to facilitate the waste infrastructure procurements. In particular, local government requested that the Bill include the power for councils to grant warranties, indemnities and guarantees and to accept joint and several liability. Moreover, consultees requested that those measures be moved from the waste Bill to the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

11.45 am

That matter was raised again by the representatives of local government groups during the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill’s Committee Stage. In its report on the Bill, the Committee for the Environment recommended that:

“in order to encourage and enhance the confidence of bidders and financiers when competing to provide waste infrastructure, the additional vires should be brought forward from the Waste Bill and included in this Bill.”

I fully accept that recommendation.

Amendment No 10 provides the additional waste vires requested by district councils and waste management groups as well as the Committee for the Environment. The amendment relates primarily to clarification on the granting of warranties, indemnities and guarantees, and the acceptance of joint and several liability. District councils do not currently have the express power to guarantee the obligations of other councils and incorporated joint committees. It is likely that in connection with any contract award relating to waste infrastructure management, the contractor and/or financiers will seek to have cross-guarantees with each of the councils for the obligations of the contracting party under the contract. That is because the individual councils are the bodies of substance in the arrangement. District councils will also be required to provide warranties, indemnities and cross-indemnities in their waste management contracts in order to provide reassurance to prospective contractors and financiers.

Those powers will need to be exercisable whether a council is acting simply in its own right or on behalf of other councils in a waste management group. Similarly, incorporated joint committees will require the power to provide such assurances. One example of such an obligation would be in a situation in which a council gives a warranty to deliver a specified tonnage of waste to a contractor for treatment. If a council defaults on the waste to be delivered, other councils need to be able to pick up on the default.

The district councils in a waste management group may have to become jointly and severally liable for any loan made to an incorporated joint committee or to a lead district council. If councils have joint liability,

they are each liable up to the full amount of the relevant obligation. That makes it easier for a contractor or a financier to recover damages in the event that a district council or a waste management group has breached the terms of a contract, and, consequently, more likely that a contract will be entered into.

The North West Region Waste Management Group is an unincorporated joint committee, and as such, is conducting its waste infrastructure procurement process through its lead council. Subsection (4) of the proposed new clause clarifies that in such cases, a council has clear powers to act on behalf of other councils, with their agreement, for waste management purposes, and that individual councils have powers to deliver their waste management functions through other councils. That includes power for a local council to enter into contracts, acquire property and borrow money for the purpose of exercising the waste management functions of participating councils in the waste management group.

SWaMP2008 and Arc21 have established incorporated joint committees under Orders made by my Department. Clause 19 amends the Orders constituting Arc21 and SWaMP2008 as bodies corporate, making it clear that Part 1 of the Bill, concerning contracts, and clause 18, concerning acquisition of land otherwise than by agreement, apply to both bodies in the same way as they apply to a district council. The amendments to clause 19 also make it clear that subsections (1) and (2), concerning the waste management functions of councils, apply to both bodies.

The proposed amendment to clause 20 simply reflects that any regulations made by my Department will be subject to draft affirmative procedures in the Assembly.

Amendment No 14 inserts an additional phrase into the long title of the Bill. Due to the inclusion of additional measures in the Bill to clarify local government powers to enter into waste management contracts, it is also necessary to ensure that the long title of the Bill is amended to adequately reflect its revised scope. The amendment makes it clear that the Bill also contains provisions concerning the exercise of waste management functions of district councils.

That concludes my explanation of my proposed amendments in the third group.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: May I raise a matter under Standing Orders, Mr Speaker? It is my understanding that Members have to stand when addressing the House, and must not do so from a seated position. Is that not the case?

Mr Speaker: It is very much the convention that Members who speak in the Chamber must stand in their place to do so.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: Perhaps the Minister will bear that in mind when moving the subsequent amendments.

The Minister of the Environment: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have specific instructions to remain seated when moving the amendments. Perhaps the Speaker will provide clarification on that.

Mr Speaker: That has always been the convention and the practice for all Ministers. They are only moving an amendment; they are not speaking.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: I would be grateful for clarification on that point, because a number of Members were looking quite confused.

Mr Speaker: I assure the Member that I am not confused. I think that that is important.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: Thank you indeed, Mr Speaker.

The amendments in group 3 focus on waste management. Local authorities and, indeed, waste management groups have made the Committee acutely aware over the past 18 months of the importance of the Bill in the functions of waste management.

The Committee greatly welcomes the new clause to be inserted after clause 18. NILGA and Arc21 advised the Committee that bringing forward powers that are proposed for inclusion in the draft waste Bill could enhance the confidence of bidders and financiers who are being encouraged to compete to provide waste infrastructure procurement. Although that may be welcome for the management of waste in general across the North, the Committee's primary concern was the impact that European waste management obligations would have on ratepayers.

The Department advised the Committee that although it was confident that the timing of the draft waste Bill would ensure that all contract provisions would be in place in good time, it was considering bringing in those additional powers earlier by incorporating them into the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill to give greater confidence to bidders and financiers. The Committee agreed that it should recommend that to encourage and enhance the confidence of bidders and financiers, and thereby reduce cost to ratepayers when competing to provide waste infrastructure, the additional powers should be brought forward from the draft waste Bill and included in the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. The Department is to be commended for doing that.

The Committee recognises the need for amendment Nos 11 and No 12, which will accommodate the inclusion of the waste powers. The Committee also welcomes amendment No 14, which extends the long title to incorporate the additional waste powers. As I mentioned

when discussing amendment No 9, the Committee welcomed the Minister's proposal to require the additional chapter 5, which provides for the transition of the responsibility for calculating and setting the district rate to be laid before and approved by a resolution of the Assembly. The Committee accordingly welcomes amendment No 13.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am delighted that someone in the Chamber is not confused. I thank Mr Ford and Mr McGlone, who has left the Chamber, for livening up the debate.

Waste management will be a major concern in any new council realignment. It is incumbent on the Committee to ensure that the powers that are transferred to councils are relevant and effective. Sinn Féin supports the amendments in this group and sees the powers to acquire lands for the disposal and management of waste as a positive step in meeting local council responsibilities. They will ensure that councils meet EU targets and protect ratepayers from EU infractions.

The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, along with the draft waste Bill, will be key to the success of local authorities having the waste infrastructure to deliver for local communities. Perhaps the Minister will provide some clarification on the draft waste Bill. Sinn Féin welcomes the Consideration Stage of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill and hopes that the Assembly will welcome it as another step on the road to changing the face of local government for the benefit of everyone.

Mr Beggs: I support the amendments in group 3. I want to speak in particular about amendment No 10, which extends councils' warranties and indemnities to other councils. That amendment may seem strange on first reading or if it is read in isolation. However, it is, as the Minister said, an enabling measure for local councils, and it is they that must carefully read any subsequent contracts and make decisions accordingly.

I understand that future waste management contracts will require significant capital infrastructure. In turn, those who provide them will want to have guaranteed streams of material for processing to protect their investment. If that were to be agreed, it would provide the best value for the ratepayer in negotiating those contracts. However, it is important that local councils entering into such contracts do so carefully and with great consideration so that appropriate figures are bought into.

I support the fact that this enabling legislation passes the responsibility as an option to local councils. I hope that it will, in turn, result in savings to ratepayers if appropriate values are entered into in the contract. I support amend No 10 and the others in that group.

Mr Ford: I am not sure how to respond to being told by Mr Boylan that I make this place interesting,

because I was proposing to be extremely boring at this point.

There were doubts among some of those involved in waste management, whether from council groups or potential private tenderers, about the vires that would apply to either a lead council arrangement or a joint committee arrangement, whether incorporated or otherwise. In proposing amendment No 10, which is fairly extensive and contains a full new clause, the Minister has dealt with those issues and ensured that the necessary reassurance is given, bearing in mind the increasing size and scale of contracts for waste management. I welcome that, and the consequential amendments that flow from it. I also welcome his reassurance on affirmative resolution.

It is unfortunate that another Bill from the Department of the Environment requires the long title to be amended. Nonetheless, that is completely within the scope of the Bill as was originally suggested. We welcome the fact that it will now be a better Bill and that it will provide significant financial savings in the future to those who pay rates for the disposal of waste right across Northern Ireland, whichever format of organisation is adopted.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Bill and the amendments. I am glad that the Minister is smiling, because I will refer to him. The Minister referred to the North West Waste Region Management Group, and I know that he is very familiar with what is going on there. I thank him for his direct intervention.

Waste management entails making provision for the disposal of waste. The situation that I am faced with, as are others, is the over-provision of waste. Given that there have been problems throughout Europe, has the Minister given any thought to what happens when one discovers that a cluster of landfill sites has been identified in planning applications? There is now an opportunity to deal with that. I hope that the Minister has given some thought to what form of protection can be given to communities finding themselves in that situation.

The European Council Directive 1999/31/EC on the landfill of waste clearly states that the aim of landfill is to protect the environment and that such protection must include the situations where up to four potential landfill sites are identified in one area. I know that the Minister has taken the matter seriously, and he wrote to me earlier in the week offering some degree of comfort.

During the process of the Bill, I hope that thought will be given to areas that may find their environment potentially destroyed as a result of the activities of new councils and how they oversee their waste management, particularly where private contractors are involved, as is the case in the north-west.

12.00 noon

The Minister of the Environment: The television programmes tonight will include major reports about an outbreak of peace in the Assembly and that harmony has prevailed, and, as we exit the Chamber, there will be a wall of flashing cameras and pressmen waiting to ask us all about it. It has all come about in the debate on the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, so it is great to be involved in that.

I will address some of the issues that Members raised in the discussion. Mr Boylan asked the question: where is the waste Bill? The intention is to introduce that Bill when it has been cleared by the Executive, and I want to clear it with the Executive this month. Therefore, we will have the opportunity to debate the Bill's legislative passage, which will include the Committee's detailed scrutiny of the legislation. Indeed, the draft Bill and the explanatory and financial memorandum have already been forwarded to the Committee for information purposes.

Most Members spoke very clearly in support of everything that we are doing here. Mr Dallat made a Freudian slip when he referred to the overprovision of waste: I assume that he meant to say the overprovision of waste-management sites.

Mr Dallat: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for pointing that out. It was a very serious mistake that could have unfolded the whole thing.

The Minister of the Environment: The point that I made is true, which is why I raised it: there is an overprovision of waste. I am getting into another debate, possibly, but we need to ensure that there is a significant reduction in the amount of waste produced in the first place. That will help to offset the problem to which Mr Dallat referred. We are picking up evidence that there is an overprovision of waste sites. At one stage, it seemed that quarries had struck gold because everyone wanted to put landfill in old quarries. However, the cost of landfill is coming down, and there is quite a bit of competition in that area now.

I want to make it absolutely clear that I see landfill as the last resort for waste. First, I want to see a reduction in waste. Secondly, I want to encourage recycling, and my Department has set a target of increasing recycling levels to 50% by 2020. I will look at that target, because I think that it could be even higher. Thirdly, I want to see energy recovery from waste.

Mr Ford: I hate to disagree with the Minister on a day of such unanimity but should it not be a matter of encouraging waste reduction and reuse before recycling?

The Minister of the Environment: That is a fair point. I want there to be less waste left at the point of recycling. Where there is waste left at that point, we

need to go for energy recovery. I am prepared to take on the challenge of energy recovery. It does not have to be through incineration, but that should not be excluded. There is a whole series of measures for dealing with waste, including incineration, anaerobic digestion, gasification and autoclaving.

Another point made, and it is a very valid point, is that councils and waste-management bodies need to be very careful about the contracts that they enter into. If a council enters into a contract with a company to provide an energy-recovery facility at huge cost, and the council does not have the materials to supply that facility, it will end up having to pay for materials that it does not need to get rid of. That will place an undue burden on ratepayers. We need to move forward very cautiously and ensure that we identify the appropriate amounts of waste that will go into energy-recovery facilities. That was a slight diversion perhaps, but it is relevant to the issue of waste. I think that I have covered most of the points that Members made.

Amendment No 10 agreed to.

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 19 (Applications of certain provisions to certain joint committees constituted as bodies corporate)

Amendment No 11 made: In page 11, line 28, at end insert

“and

(c) section (Exercise of waste management functions of councils)(1) and (2) (contracts for waste management purposes).”
— [*The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).*]

Amendment No 12 made: In page 11, line 35, at end insert

“and

(c) section (Exercise of waste management functions of councils)(1) and (2) (contracts for waste management purposes).”
— [*The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).*]

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

Clause 20 (Regulations and orders)

Amendment No 13 made: In page 12, line 5, after “3” insert “or 5”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).*]

Clause 20, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 21 to 23 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title

Amendment No 14 made: In the long title, after “councillors;” insert

“to make provision in relation to the exercise of waste management functions of district councils;”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).*]

Long title, as amended, agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

I ask the House to take its ease until the next item of business commences.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Cancer Treatment

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

Mrs O'Neill: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that people undergoing treatment for cancer can find themselves vulnerable to poverty because of their changed circumstances; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, as part of his service framework for cancer prevention, treatment and care, to provide access to quality, on-site financial aid and advice services for people undergoing such treatment.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the cancer services framework published by the Department and want to put it on record that there has been positive feedback from the consultation, which is still open for responses.

In that context, I want to discuss the issue of financial support for cancer patients. For anyone who is diagnosed with cancer, it is a life-changing event. Life is often turned upside down and thrown into turmoil. One receives excellent information in relation to care pathways, methods of treatment, etc, but the costs of living with cancer are often forgotten. Many cancer patients and their families deal with a huge financial burden as a result of the illness. Some 91% of cancer households suffer loss of income and/or increased costs as a direct result of cancer. A 2005 Audit Office report found that 77% of cancer patients are not given financial support information.

Macmillan Cancer Support found that for many people who are affected by cancer, financial concerns are second only to physical pain as a cause of stress. Examples of how people's lives are affected by cancer poverty are included in the information pack that has been produced for Members by the Assembly's Research and Library Service. Members can read for themselves just how people's lives are affected adversely by a diagnosis of cancer.

There are situations that one would not even think of. When we think about someone having cancer, we do not often think about the costs; we often think just about the health aspects. We do not, for one minute, think that a person could be in danger of losing their home as they have not worked for six months and cannot afford their mortgage payments. We do not often think that a person may not eat a healthy diet as they cannot afford to buy fresh food. Unfortunately, however, those are inescapable realities of how cancer affects lives. We need to look at the barriers to getting

assistance. Many cancer patients are unaware that they may be entitled to claim statutory benefits. They are often unaware of how to access the benefits system and what services are offered by social security offices or independent advice providers.

Given the nature of cancer and its side effects, most patients are not well enough to attend their local social security offices for advice, even if they know to do so. Indeed, cancer patients are often advised not to be in a crowded environment in order to prevent infection. It is important that people be informed that they are entitled to financial support as early as possible because most applications for financial assistance through the benefits system cannot be backdated or can be backdated only for a limited period, and also because the decision-making process is often a lengthy one.

Over the years, Macmillan's benefits services, which are based at Altnagelvin Area Hospital, have shown that less than 10% of service users have never accessed the benefits system. My background is in providing welfare rights, and I am only too aware of the minefield that is the benefits system. It is a daunting task for anyone to navigate their way through it.

Welfare rights services are provided at Altnagelvin Area Hospital in partnership with the north-west independent advice service and in the Royal Group of Hospitals in partnership with the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux. Both those services are funded by Macmillan Cancer Support. The service at the Belfast City Hospital, which is open to people right across the North, is a partnership funded with Citizens Advice and lottery funding. However, demand is outstripping the service's capacity. It is experiencing a large number of clients from other trust areas, such as the Northern Trust, the South Eastern Trust and the Southern Trust, in which there is no such service. There are proposals to develop services in those areas. There is proof that there is a demand for that service, so we need to provide it.

Collective partnership working can deliver those services for those who require them. I encourage the Minister and the Department to work with those organisations and with the Department for Social Development (DSD) to ensure that key financial support is offered to assist those who are living with cancer when they need it most.

I call on the Minister to use today's debate to assist deliberations. It is unfortunate, to say the least, that he has not come to the Chamber today to listen to the debate. I ask the Minister to use today's debate to inform him when he considers the responses to the consultation document. It is important that he recognise the need to ensure that the framework contains a standard that ensures that all people who are affected by cancer are given information about what

financial help is available, how to access it, and their rights under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

That recommendation is in line with the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) supportive and palliative care guidelines. They recommend explicitly that systems be put in place to direct patients to expert advice on benefits, including support and completing application forms. I urge the Minister to introduce a strong standard under the cancer services framework to ensure that financial advice is provided consistently and effectively across the board. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Easton: Cancer is a terrible and often debilitating disease. Patients who undergo treatment are often unable to work for a considerable period; they may have to give up a good job and rely on state benefits. Most jobs offer sick leave on full pay for up to six months; others, however, do not, and that results in a considerable drop in income for the household concerned.

It has been found that 91% of cancer patient households suffer a loss of income at a time at which they may also experience an increase in costs that are associated with their cancer. The average drop in income for those households is 50%.

Cancer can result in patients experiencing physical or psychological illnesses for the rest of their lives and, as such, can have an impact on their ability to work.

12.15 pm

Mr Bell: Does Mr Easton share my concern over the case of one lady with whom I dealt? She found that cancer significantly disrupted her psychological, social and emotional circumstances. She had to travel some 20 miles in a state of exhaustion as a result of her medication and disruption to her personal circumstances in order to receive advice. To have to seek financial help in those critical circumstances is unacceptable. As the motion states, such help should be available on site.

Mr Speaker: The Member may speak for an extra minute.

Mr Easton: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I totally agree with my colleague. It is unacceptable for a cancer sufferer to have to travel so far and to experience financial problems as a result of a debilitating illness. We must get to the bottom of that. We must also remember that a cancer diagnosis affects a sufferer's family, who may be required to care for their loved one.

People of working age diagnosed with cancer are six times more likely to report being unable to return to work because of their health than people with other illnesses. The loss of a job or an income can bring stress on anyone. However, in the case of people who are living with cancer, it should not be a burden, because

they have enough to deal with. Their main focus should be on recovery; financial stress should be avoided. Cancer can also result in a patient incurring additional costs for travel, drugs, special diets, heating bills and clothing. The state should protect such people here as much as it possibly can.

The decision to make prescription drugs free to all users of the Health Service has to be welcomed, because cancer patients who were not receiving benefits previously had to pay for their drugs on the NHS. Given their conditions, those cancer sufferers would have been taking a large number of drugs at considerable cost. That situation particularly affected middle-income families, in which the person diagnosed with cancer was unable to work while receiving treatment.

Travel costs are also a major factor. Over the years, more and more hospitals have charged patients and visitors for parking. Unfortunately, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has ignored an Assembly vote against charging for parking at our hospitals. Patients suffering from cancer make regular trips to hospitals or health centres; therefore, the costs add up.

At present, it is up to an individual to seek advice about benefits to which he or she may be entitled. However, people with cancer should be informed of their entitlements and assisted through every step of the way in securing them. I call on the Minister to work with his colleague the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, who is responsible for the Social Security Agency, to seek to resolve the issues surrounding poverty and cancer. Those issues must be urgently addressed.

I fear that we are becoming increasingly more reliant on charities, which do some great work. However, it is clear that many charities and support groups have emerged because the Health Service has failed people in aspects of their care and treatment. Cancer treatment is a very serious issue. I commend the motion to the House and I, too, express my deep disappointment that there is to be no ministerial response to the debate.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Members who tabled the motion. I agree with other Members that being diagnosed with cancer must be an absolutely frightening, stressful and confusing experience. Figures from groups such as Macmillan Cancer Support show that 1.2 million people across the UK — approximately 31,000 in Northern Ireland — were diagnosed with cancer five or more years ago.

Financial support is the crux of some of the issues that we are debating. It must be borne in mind that 90% of people who are affected by cancer in the UK experience a drop in income and an increase in daily living expenses because of their cancer diagnosis.

Mr Easton mentioned sick pay, which goes to the core of our debate. Many people do not have a public sector job that may guarantee six months' full pay and six months' half pay. That level of support simply does not exist in the private sector.

Mr McCartney: I wonder whether the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety outlined to the Member, his party colleague, the reason why he would not be here. If he did so, perhaps the Member will share that information with the rest of the House?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an additional minute in which to speak.

Mr McCallister: I am happy to share that information with the rest of the House. I have just spoken to the Minister, and he said that the subject of the debate is a matter for the Department for Social Development. It is about financial help for cancer sufferers, and if Members read the motion, they will see that it is about:

“on-site financial aid and advice services for people undergoing such treatment.”

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat. Does the Member agree that the motion is calling for access to on-site support and cancer treatment services in hospital grounds? We are asking for a standard within the framework to ensure that, after an appointment or treatment at a hospital, people are given appropriate support and financial advice at the same hospital site. That can be achieved cross-departmentally through DSD, the Health Service and the voluntary sector, but the Health Department must take the lead.

Mr McCallister: I thank Mrs O'Neill for her useful intervention. However, does she accept that the people who give such critical advice to cancer sufferers should be from the Social Security Agency, which falls under DSD's remit? I do not imagine that there would be any issue about giving such advice on-site in hospitals, as the Member rightly said.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for giving way, about which he has been very gracious. Does he accept that if that is the case, and if the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety holds that view strongly, he should have talked to the Minister for Social Development to arrange for at least one of them to be here to respond? They operate as part of the Executive, not simply in individual silos.

Mr McCallister: The Member makes a useful point. The House will want to see the motion acted upon and it will want the cross-departmental work about which Mrs O'Neill and Mrs Long spoke so that people receive appropriate financial assistance.

Last week, many Members took part in Macmillan Cancer Support's excellent event in the Long Gallery. It highlighted the very issue that the motion addresses,

whereby someone on an income of, say, £2,000 a month might see their income drop to practically nothing. Such a person may have no experience of the benefits system, so he or she would need the Department for Social Development's professional advice and guidance to navigate his or her way around the system. He or she would also have to work with the voluntary sector, which still has a huge impact in that area. Patients' access to financial advice and guidance is the key point of the debate, so I welcome moves to get that assistance to them.

I also encourage people to respond to the consultation on the service framework for cancer prevention, treatment and care. Although the process finishes in the next few days, it is important that people respond and get their points across. On the ground, people already have to deal with hugely stressful circumstances due to illnesses over which they have no control, without having to face the added worries of being left in poverty and, consequently, being unable even to heat their homes. Such added stresses and worries can only exacerbate their illnesses. We should be debating and addressing benefit uptake for people who have been diagnosed with cancer.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr McDevitt, I remind Members that this is the first time that the Assembly will hear from him, and that it is the convention that a maiden speech should not be interrupted.

Mr McDevitt: Cancer robs this region of 4,000 lives every year, which is more than died in the 30 years of our dirty war. Its victims know no class. They are not counted by religion, nor are they remembered in our hallowed halls or state memorials. They are our sisters, our mothers, our friends and our foes. I should like to mention a few of their names today to place them on the record of the Assembly as a permanent memorial: people we loved and miss, such as my parents, Cathy and Rory McDevitt, or my late friend John Fee; people who gave us hope and made us smile, such as Nuala O'Faolain, whose lights went dim before her life expired, and Mo Mowlam, who has returned from beyond the grave to be in our lives this week.

The history of cancer has often been one of loss, yet, in Northern Ireland, since 1998, we have been fighting back, and many sufferers now have a new story to tell — a tale of survival and hope. It is the story of Carmel Hanna, who has given me the opportunity to stand here today. When faced with a diagnosis, she was able to fight back to serve us as a Minister and to champion peace and reconciliation in our land. The House will know that it will take all my best efforts and full health to live up to her record as a public representative, a legislator and a campaigner for the voiceless and the marginalised.

I hope never to sit in a consultant's office and be told that I have cancer. It must be a day that you never forget, when life flashes in front of you throwing everything into the air; a day when, at your weakest, you must dig deep inside and prepare for the fight ahead. It is the first day of fighting to live, of tests and chemo, of loss of income, of questions about who to tell and how to cope as your body fights itself and your treatment, of weeks of being better and sick, then better and sick again.

One would think that the state would rally around someone going through the trauma of diagnosis, yet often it does not. The majority of those who are faced with the grave diagnosis do not know that they are entitled to help and are not provided with the information that they need to access important benefits that could help them and their loved ones through the turmoil ahead. Many will face a new poverty foisted upon them by cancer. They will worry about little things, such as the cost of car parking and the multiple trips to hospital. That is why the issue was raised at the Health Committee by my colleague Dolores Kelly, and it is why the SDLP supports the motion. It is also why we have argued for palliative care support from the moment of diagnosis and for proper recognition for the silent and invisible army of carers who quietly nurse friends and family. It is not just doctors who fight cancer but the state as a whole, supported by many voluntary groups who provide expert support to those who must now put all their energies into simply getting better.

World-class medical treatment is very close at hand when people in south Belfast fall under the shadow of cancer. Professor Paddy Johnston and his team at the Northern Ireland Cancer Centre and colleagues at Belvoir Park Hospital are bringing the best possible treatment and research to the people of this region. However, quietly and behind the scenes, welfare rights groups, established by Macmillan Cancer Support, provide advice and other help to those in need. The team at Belfast City Hospital, which is in my constituency, was established in 2007. It is a partnership with the citizens advice bureau, and it has funding until next year. Patients from all over Northern Ireland have availed themselves of the service, which is now at breaking point because it is attracting users from areas where no support is available.

To represent South Belfast is to represent the new North; a diverse and vibrant part of our great city and a microcosm of where our region is headed. New accents echo through the red brick terraces and the rainbow of humanity finds home in our communities. However, their arrival has brought to the surface another pervasive disease that is endemic in this part of Ireland. In supporting the motion, I call on all Members to put the same effort into tackling the cancer of sectarianism

and racism in Northern Ireland. Let us lead by example in the Assembly. Let us declare war on division and on bigotry; let us build a region for everyone, a place where equality is more than just a slogan, where children have a right to make their own history, where government works, and where our people grow old in safety and in peace.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.30 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the United Community, I support the important motion that is before the House. I thank the Members who brought it to the Floor.

As has already been said, utmost in the mind of someone who is diagnosed with cancer is how and when he or she can be cured. The person is certainly not thinking of financial matters at that point in his or her life. I want to put on record my party's thanks and sincere congratulations to all the organisations in Northern Ireland that have done and continue to do tremendous work, not only to help patients to survive the disease but to give assistance and direction on how to overcome the shortfall in family finance that they will undoubtedly face and, thereby, ensure that patients can concentrate on getting well again.

We expect the service framework for cancer prevention, treatment and care to include facilities through which cancer patients can have easy access to financial aid and advice. Incidentally, at last night's meeting of the health committee of Ards Borough Council, of which I am a member, I received unanimous support for a response to that document in the positive way that we are discussing it today. I suggest that MLAs who are also council members consider the same option.

As recently as last week, along with other Members, I attended a meeting of Macmillan Cancer Support in Parliament Buildings. I pay tribute to the enormous efforts of that organisation to bring the important issue right up to Assembly level, where it matters. Hopefully, we will get the desired result. I note that, in its documentation, Macmillan Cancer Support acknowledges the good progress that has been made to date by the local Assembly and, indeed, by the Health Minister. That is what we are here for. We hope that more can and will be done.

My meeting with Macmillan staff last week was extremely informative. I was totally astonished by the amount of paperwork — forms etc — that cancer patients face at a time when they could certainly do without it. Surely, that must be revised and ways must be found by various Departments to provide a financial advice service to help patients at the earliest opportunity. Also of note is the fact, which has been mentioned in the debate, that cancer patients may not be aware that they are covered by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Again, I pay tribute to Macmillan's work in providing a service in major hospitals. Indeed, it is hoped that the service will be operational in my own trust area and available in the Ulster Hospital, the Ards Community Hospital and the Bangor Community Hospital in the

near future. I understand that the service is to be fully funded by Macmillan for a two-year period.

Recently, I also had the pleasure of attending a presentation by the Northern Ireland Cancer Network (NICaN) in the Building. Part-financed by Macmillan Cancer Support, NICaN is a managed clinical network within Northern Ireland's health and personal social services. All organisations' efforts are welcome. Indeed, they play a real and significant role in assisting cancer patients to receive health services and direction on how to avail themselves of the financial benefits to which they are fully entitled, so that they can provide for their family's requirements and use their energies to get back to health.

The Alliance Party fully supports the motion. I sincerely hope that the Department acknowledges the will of the House and includes a standard as agreed by the House.

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion. I am disappointed that the Minister is not present to listen to the debate and to respond. The issue is vital to people across Northern Ireland, and the Minister should be in the Chamber to hear the debate.

The motion deals with issues that are faced by many people from all walks of life and from various backgrounds. I am sure that most Members, if not all, can associate themselves with someone, perhaps a family member, who has faced the double blow of serious illness, such as cancer, and the severe financial difficulties that it can create.

It is often rightly said that wealth is health and that without our health we have nothing. How true it is that we should be thankful every day that we have our health and strength. Health is fragile, and so often, out of the blue, people lose their health. I am sure that all of us, at some time, have thought about how we might react if we were told that we were suffering from an illness that was potentially terminal. I have no doubt that the world of anyone who receives such news is immediately turned upside down.

We are greatly encouraged by the advances in modern medicine. No longer is cancer the sure and certain death sentence that it once was. Nowadays, we can be offered the hope of a cure or, at the very least, an assurance that the illness can be controlled. Despite that, cancer treatment is often a prolonged, distressful and depressing process, and many people find themselves out of work for long periods. That can lead to severe financial difficulties, which merely add to the feelings of distress and depression.

I pay tribute to the sterling work that is done by Macmillan Cancer Support. According to figures that it released recently, 31,000 people in Northern Ireland were diagnosed with cancer five or more years ago. In 2008, Macmillan also reported that three quarters of

cancer patients in Northern Ireland have financial concerns. That does not mean that three quarters of cancer patients are in poverty, but it highlights the extent of the problem. On the basis of those statistics, we can say that around 23,500 cancer sufferers in Northern Ireland face financial worries and pressures.

We should look at how those pressures come about. There is often a loss of direct income, because a person cannot work. A high percentage of the working population in Northern Ireland is employed by the public sector. I appreciate that the public sector shows concern for the welfare of its staff, but there will be financial repercussions, especially for those in low-grade jobs, if the illness is prolonged.

The problem is more serious in the private sector. For instance, if a self-employed person's business collapses as a result of his or her illness, it will have a knock-on effect if he or she has to pay off staff. Often, people who are employed in the private sector have fewer employment and welfare rights than those in other sectors. They are, therefore, vulnerable to financial pressures when serious illness strikes.

As well as the loss of direct income faced by people who are battling cancer, the overall cost of living can soar. Their heating costs increase; they incur costs for transport to and from hospital; their childcare arrangements can become a problem; their diet may need to change, and that can prove to be expensive; they may require new clothing; and many patients need more medicines and, therefore, more prescriptions.

In outlining the issues that confront us, I feel strongly that everything possible must be done to offer help and reassurance to those who find themselves sinking into poverty as a result of cancer. That is why access to quality on-site financial aid and advice services for people who are undergoing such treatment is essential. I know that steps have been and are being taken by the Executive. As chairperson of the Assembly all-party group on cancer, I welcome the draft service framework for cancer prevention and care.

In his absence, I urge the Health Minister to act swiftly to ensure that the implementation of some type of programme be carried through once the consultation ends on Friday.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome Members' contributions so far to the Sinn Féin motion on cancer treatment. It is obvious that the subject touches every family.

Last night, in advance of today's debate, I spoke to a cancer survivor in my constituency of West Tyrone. That young married man explained the difficulties that he and his wife faced with regard to the most simple things; for example, when he attempted to have a stair lift installed in his home to help him in his cancer journey and to allow him to have some dignity. However,

he said that the services provided by Macmillan Cancer Support at Altnagelvin Hospital were invaluable, and I gave him an undertaking to have that fact recorded today.

The motion calls on the Minister to provide information, access and advice about the services available to people with cancer and to those who have survived cancer. The Deputy Chairperson has already referred to having those services available on the hospital site.

Commenting on the briefing note from Macmillan, Kieran McCarthy said that Macmillan is keen that we celebrate the support that has come from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety so far, and I want to be associated with those comments. However, Macmillan goes on to say that it is disappointed that there is no standard in the consultation document that relates specifically to financial support. When I revisited the consultation document, I found that it contained 52 standards, but none referred to financial support.

The Research and Library Services information pack on the motion refers to 'Better Cancer Care, an Action Plan', a 2008 document from the Scottish Government, which states that cancer poverty is acknowledged in the actions that the Scottish Government have taken. There is a difference in emphasis between that document and the Department's consultation document, although that is not a criticism. The debate illustrates the point that there must be a standard relating to financial support, and Macmillan is calling for it. The fact that we are having such a positive response to the debate puts on record the fact that there is support for that standard in the consultation document, and the consultation closes on 5 February. I support the motion.

2.15 pm

Mr Hamilton: Although the motion is, in word if not literally, directed at the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I initially want to speak as the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development. At this stage in the debate and particularly after Mr McDevitt's very emotional and thoughtful maiden speech, no one needs to elaborate on the debilitating and devastating effects that a cancer diagnosis can have on an individual and their family. Today's debate has shown us all that there is hardly a soul in the House, let alone in our society, who has not been directly or indirectly affected by cancer. That is why all parties have shown such passion and interest in the debate.

In that context, a very dry rundown of what the Committee for Social Development has done to address cancer poverty may in some ways seem unfitting or inappropriate. However, given the interest that the Committee has shown in that subject and given that there is a clear interface between benefits and health, it may be useful in the context of the debate to give such a rundown.

We must acknowledge that cancer treatment is getting better. Many cancer patients now live longer and enjoy more productive and complete lives than ever before. However, Macmillan Cancer Support has advised the Committee for Social Development that poverty is one of the less welcome consequences of the improvement in survival rates. Although modern treatments are effective, they can also be long and difficult and can involve extended periods of sickness. During such periods, a patient simply cannot work. Some cancer patients may have to remain at home for nearly 24 hours each day, and evidence suggests that they are consequently obliged to use a surprisingly large part of their reduced incomes or benefit payments to keep their home warm. The Committee for Social Development found that that is a real problem, and Macmillan Cancer Support advised that around two thirds of the grant aid that it distributes goes to meet cancer patients' fuel costs and that approximately 85% of the cancer patients that it has dealt with are living in fuel poverty.

State benefits and support are, of course, available to people who face that situation. However, the fluctuating and cyclical nature of the disease can make it difficult for patients to demonstrate on an application form that they satisfy the criteria for disability benefits. As a practical measure in response, the Committee for Social Development suggested extending winter fuel payments to every seriously ill cancer patient who is under 60 years of age. That group is easily identifiable, and extending that benefit would cost approximately £150,000 each year.

As all Members know, the social security system is intricate, complex and difficult to navigate. In addition to the practical measure that I outlined, the Committee for Social Development recognised that although Social Security Agency staff may have limited understanding of the issues that are associated with living with cancer — for example, diagnosis and prognosis — health and social care professionals can also lack knowledge of the benefits system. The consequences of that lack of a joined-up government approach may be that no sector, other than the voluntary sector, is able to provide accurate and appropriate information to cancer patients about the benefits to which they are entitled.

Mr McCallister: On that point, would the Member and perhaps the Committee for Social Development consider looking at how the Social Security Agency could, as Mrs O'Neill outlined earlier, be integrated into the hospital setting? That would enable the agency to get the information to those who need it when they need it.

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

Mr Hamilton: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Member for his intervention. I would not be too precious about how precisely that service would be delivered.

Like others, I had the opportunity last week to meet Macmillan Cancer Support advisers, and I saw the very good work that they do. Those individuals are working on the front line and have been successful in recouping £5 million in benefits for cancer patients. They are saying clearly that the service that they provide must be mainstreamed. I would not be too precious about how the service is mainstreamed and who delivers it. However, had the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety been here, I would have impressed on him the need to take a collaborative approach with the Minister for Social Development to address the issue. However, we all agree that the service must be provided and that that must happen in a hospital setting. Who provides that service is a matter for discussion, but it is essential that it is given in a hospital setting.

I am sure that, when someone is diagnosed with cancer, the subject of benefits is the last thing on their mind as they deal with the consequences of that diagnosis. It would be extremely helpful and in the spirit of investing to save if there could be an integrated system within the hospital setting that directed people, as part of their treatment, to an on-site benefit advice service.

I have been told that the figure to integrate and mainstream such a system could amount to around £500,000, which may be difficult to secure, given the current tight health budget. However, if one considers the long-term benefits, the £5 million that Macmillan has already helped to recoup and the impact of reducing readmissions to hospital — as I said, people may be falling into fuel poverty because of the impact of their illness on their income — one can see that much more than that £500,000 could be saved. Clearly the benefit money would be recouped, but a fortune could also be saved in expenditure on readmissions to hospitals. With that in mind, I welcome the motion and support it wholeheartedly.

Mr Gardiner: I will begin by praising the excellent work done by Macmillan Cancer Support, which I have had the honour of supporting through the annual coffee mornings held in my constituency of Upper Bann. In particular and in the context of the motion, I praise Macmillan Cancer Support for the excellent booklet that it provides to cancer sufferers — the Northern Ireland edition of 'Help with the Cost of Cancer'. That booklet sets out the financial options for cancer sufferers of working age and for cancer sufferers who are pensioners or have children, as well as the help available for carers. It covers help with housing costs; help with health costs; the availability of loans

and grants; transport options; and a list of useful support organisations.

Cancer patients, particularly those in work, suffer seriously from a loss of earnings estimated to be as high as 50% for those aged under 55. Some 91% of cancer patients' households suffer a loss of income coupled with increased costs. In 2005, the National Audit Office found that 77% of all patients are not given any financial support information. In my view, cancer sufferers are entitled to high-quality financial advice under disability discrimination legislation. That should be supported by a national helpline, so that accessing information is both fast and easy for patients.

Special arrangements are in place for enhanced benefits for terminally ill patients. Some benefits also need to be fast-tracked for cancer sufferers. The Health Department already offers help through the NHS low-income scheme, which can help with prescription charges, dental treatment, sight tests, spectacles and travel. I would like to see that list extended. I would also like to see a special category of support introduced to the national benefits system for all seriously ill and terminally ill patients. Fast-track payments should be a part of that support. That is primarily a matter for the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in Whitehall, because changes of that order would need to be nationwide.

We must also realise that the delivery of all government services, including the Health Service, is a co-operative venture involving the Government and organisations like Macmillan Cancer Support. Macmillan is already fulfilling an excellent and important role in addition to its many other valuable roles. In offering a service that provides information on how to survive cancer financially, Macmillan works in close co-operation with other agencies for which I have the highest regard: citizens advice bureaux. They offer advice on applying for benefits; appealing benefits decisions; applying for tax credits; meeting health and travel costs; accessing disability parking badges; housing queues; debts; and a host of other problems.

There are 55,000 people in Northern Ireland living with or beyond a cancer diagnosis. That is a considerable section of society. It is 3% of the population, and 31,000 of those sufferers were diagnosed five or more years ago.

The Irish Republic's Finance Minister, Mr Brian Lenihan TD, has announced that he will continue to work during his treatment. Not all employers take as understanding a position as that which the Irish Government have taken on this occasion. It is essential that financial information be readily accessible and available for sufferers.

Many Members have spoken of the absence of the Health Minister from this debate. Only yesterday, the First Minister and deputy First Minister did not appear

for Question Time, and no reason was given other than that they had another engagement. People should get their priorities right before they start to criticise the Health Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close.

Mr Gardiner: It is the Minister for Social Development who should be taking this on, not the Health Minister.

Mrs D Kelly: It is quite clear from my reading of the motion that its point is about having on-site financial aid. No one has said that such financial advice and assistance does not exist; the critical question is about where it is delivered and how it is accessed. I am pleased to say that my proposal to have the Health Committee ask for the inclusion of this standard in the consultation on the framework services report was supported by all parties and by the Independent Member on the Committee.

Mr Hamilton was correct to say that the lives of few if any Members have not been affected by cancer. My mother died from cancer at the age of 54, and I remember well the trauma, grief and distress that it caused not only to her, my father and my brothers and sisters but to her mother, who died from cancer 18 months later. Many families have a history of people being bereaved and lives being touched by the ravages of cancer.

We have all worked with colleagues who have suffered from and come through cancer. Members have made the important point that many people have come through the other side, but that journey is fraught with anxiety about how to manage and cope. Anyone who has witnessed a person having chemotherapy or radiotherapy will know about the debilitating nature of the treatments for cancer. Those treatments have their own drastic consequences in causing ill health, and, for that reason, many people are no longer able to work.

Much medical evidence shows that stress and anxiety are contributory causes of cancer and are factors in exacerbating the condition as the disease progresses. In these straitened times, when many homes are worrying about finances for a number of reasons, we can only imagine the additional stress that is caused to a family worried about making ends meet when one of its main wage earners is unable to work because of cancer.

It is incumbent on society to help people through such difficult times, and we can all agree that the purpose of the Good Friday Agreement was to build a better society in which the people who are most marginalised and vulnerable would be protected. That is why the Assembly has a statutory obligation to tackle poverty and its causes and to promote social inclusion. I wish that those who were charged with implementing those policies would do so with a much more determined effort than has been demonstrated to date.

I associate myself with Mr Gardiner's praise for Macmillan Cancer Support, which does an excellent job not only in the provision of advice services but in supporting families the whole way through cancer treatment and sometimes, in the most unfortunate circumstances, in palliative care.

That work is often not acknowledged in the way in which it should be. People who work with and care for those who are ill are the real heroes of our society.

The SDLP supports the proposal fully. A lot of help exists for people who are undergoing treatment for cancer, but the point of the debate is that that help should be available and easily accessible. I readily lend my support to the motion.

2.30 pm

Mr G Robinson: I welcome the investment in cancer treatment that has been announced by the Health Minister, especially the cancer centre at Altnagelvin Area Hospital, which shows a financial commitment that has been long required and the will to put projects in place. The life-saving treatment that such centres provide cannot be underestimated in any way. I congratulate all those organisations that give so much help and support to that worthy cause. I wish to record my disappointment that the Minister is not in the House for the debate.

I ask the Minister, in conjunction with other Departments or voluntary bodies, to ensure that, as part of the treatment process, information regarding the financial assistance that is available to patients with cancer is made available in cancer treatment centres. Many people find themselves in financial difficulties due to their illness and the resulting loss of income, travel costs and other factors. It would be a great boost for them to have readily accessible information on financial assistance. I have known cases in which not only cancer but other illnesses have led to individuals and families being left in dire financial difficulties, as they have been unaware of any available assistance. Financial worries can be only an additional burden to people and families when their focus should be on recovering from illness.

As elected representatives, most Members are used to dealing with the benefits system, but many people have little or no experience of it. Those people are at the greatest risk of missing out on the benefits to which they are entitled. There is also a concern that families with young children or people who are retired are at the greatest risk of missing out. Therefore, I ask the Minister to examine closely an interdepartmental or inter-agency approach to providing a service that will ensure that everyone who needs financial assistance can get suitable advice. That can most easily be done at clinical appointments. I point the Minister to an example of practice at Causeway Hospital. When there is an eye clinic, members of the Royal National Institute

for the Blind (RNIB) are in attendance in the hospital's foyer to give advice. That is invaluable help to patients, and it is an excellent example of what can also be done for cancer patients. I stress that, for the patients' protection, the organisations that would be tasked to provide information would have to be recognised for their ability to do so reliably.

The adoption of an all-round approach to treating a serious illness is a practical and sensible way of ensuring that those who are going through the trying experience of serious illness can be reassured that they will be made aware of any financial assistance available. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. There is no doubt that everyone in the Chamber is aware of at least one person who has suffered from cancer. Many of us have knowledge of the issue that we are discussing today. One in every three people is affected by cancer in some way. I have experience of it in my family, and I am sure that other Members have it in theirs. As elected representatives, we deal with many people who have cancer. We see what it means when the dreaded "c word" is used, because people are scared. I am aware of some people who are very close to us in the Chamber who are facing bad times.

Thaire ir a clatter o' femmelies i the Province the noo wha ir fechtin cancer an' this motion heighlights the fecht at thaim at dinnae fecht no onie agin the cancer an' depression an' fear — they fecht agin practical hannlins an' hannlins adae wi' catter forebye.

There are an awful lot of families right now in the Province who are battling cancer, and the motion highlights the fact that they are fighting not only against cancer, depression and fear but against practical and financial difficulties. That is the issue that I want to concentrate on during the short time that I have in which to speak.

Those families do their best for their loved ones by buying them organic food, ensuring that they have the right diet and by keeping them warm, which is what they are told they should be doing. However, a number of people have told me that it has been particularly difficult to keep warm this winter. Those people's homes, which I visited, were like fridges. In fact, it was colder in their homes than it was outside, which is almost impossible to believe, given the weather that we have had this winter.

I wish to promote Macmillan Cancer Support's campaign to turn up the heat: it has been a real issue faced by many people this winter. A recent Macmillan survey found that one in five cancer patients turn the heating off because they are worried about rising fuel bills, even though they are cold. The fact that many cancer patients have probably experienced a 50% reduction in their income because of their illness alone

highlights the importance of the issue, and I think that Members are aware of that.

Consider the costs faced by the family of a cancer patient who visit the hospital: they must pay for all-day parking, which is not cheap, and take days off work, which is also costly. They also face the other problems that heap up.

I pay tribute to the Minister, who, unfortunately, is not here today, for his decision to remove prescription charges for cancer patients from April. That is good news and a step in the right direction. However, we are looking for a wee bit more. I hope that the Member who will be summing up shortly will focus on that issue.

There is no doubt that as well as affecting a family emotionally, cancer affects its financial stability. For families already on the breadline, it can be a step too far and can take them over the line. I commend Macmillan Cancer Support, Action Cancer and Marie Curie Cancer Care for the tremendous work that they do. I believe that the onus is on the strong to look after the weak, and I do not say that in a dismissive way; I mean it honestly, because I believe that it is true. It is important that we look after those cancer patients who do not automatically qualify for help with fuel or food payments. Those patients spend more time at home recovering than they do in hospital, and it is important that they are looked after at home. However, the issue of rising fuel bills must be addressed in order to facilitate that.

Macmillan Cancer Support is campaigning for more help for cancer patients who are struggling to cope with rising fuel bills, and I fully support that campaign. Ards Borough Council also supports the campaign; and the Assembly has an opportunity to do so today.

The winter fuel payment is not sufficient. People with cancer should be eligible for social tariffs and should be included in new mandatory price support, because that would give them a much needed discount on their fuel bills and would help with other factors. For that reason, I congratulate the Members who secured the debate in the Chamber today.

We have heard true stories about constituents who come with tears in their eyes to tell of their family circumstances, their children, etc. This is not like a housing issue or planning matter, where one can phone a Department or an officer and ask for support and help in addressing the issue.

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

Mr Shannon: The motion gives us an opportunity to address this problem. I ask Members to support the motion, and I believe they will. We should focus our energy on the people who need help.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to make the

winding-up speech in the debate. I thank the Members who took part in what has been a useful debate: they have all said that they will support the motion. Therefore, it is probably a good day for cancer services in the North, when all parties in the Assembly have said that they will support a motion that is trying to advance those services.

Normally, at this stage in a debate, I thank the Minister for attending; but he is not here today. I think that that is an issue: the Minister should be here, where possible. We need to live in the real world, and when the Minister told us months ago that he was dealing with the issue of swine flu, we accepted that. However, why is he not here today?

Mr Spratt: Will the Member accept that this is not the first time that the Minister has not appeared in the House to respond to important health debates and that he has shied away from such debates in the House on a number of occasions?

Ms S Ramsey: Absolutely. My colleague and I have asked Research and Library Services to give us a list of the debates that have taken place on swine flu and which of those the Minister has attended. It is important that the Health Minister, in common with all Ministers, takes the opportunity to come to the House to tell Members what he is going to do. I am not in the business of criticising for the sake of it, and I have commended the Minister when he needed to be commended. However, I am criticising him for not coming here today.

We do not know what is happening. A consultation exercise is going on. However, the Minister should have come to the House today to tell us what the issues are. John McCallister said that financial aid and advice services are not in the Health Minister's remit and that the Minister does not see that as his problem. Rather, he sees it as DSD's problem. If that is the case, I ask the Minister what he has done about that and whether he has talked to DSD. One minute we are told that the Minister is not here because he is dealing with swine flu, but the next we are told that he is not here because the issues that are under debate are DSD issues. It would be useful if the Minister were to get a copy of the Hansard report of the debate, because there are questions that he needs to answer.

In a letter to the Health Committee of 30 November 2009, the Minister said:

"Although as Minister with responsibility for health issues, my focus must always be on using the resources available to me to provide the means to treat disease and face the clinical challenges posed by cancer, I am aware that access to high quality, up to date information is critical to the wellbeing of patients, families and carers affected by cancer."

He went on to say:

"This includes effective signposting to benefits and financial advice but does not go as far as giving commitments on the specific provision of such advice as responsibility for this lies with other Departments, notably DSD."

At the end of the letter, the Minister said that he would ensure that the Committee's comments would be considered.

However, consultation closes this week, and we do not know whether the Minister has approached DSD or talked to the Minister for Social Development or to his Executive colleagues. The issue is not just about people's health and well-being; it is about investment for health. The Minister is being disingenuous by one minute saying that he is not here because of issues to do with swine flu, and the next, his party colleague is saying that he is not here because the matter under debate is not his issue.

I thank the research departments at Action Cancer and Macmillan Cancer Support for their briefing papers. Most, if not all, Members who spoke in the debate used statistics that those organisations provided. In its briefing paper, Macmillan said that it was very proud of the enormous steps that the Assembly and the Health Ministers have taken over the past decade to support cancer patients. Macmillan believes that that should be celebrated in the debate, and I think that that is absolutely right.

Some Members, including Jim Shannon, highlighted the issue of free prescriptions being available from April. Other Members talked about the steps forward on financial support for cancer treatment and research. Conall McDevitt talked about the good work that is being done by Paddy Johnston. Such work needs to be celebrated. As Jim said, 10 years ago, cancer was seen as "the big C", and, in my family, the word "cancer" was whispered. Now people are dealing with cancer and trying to move forward.

Action Cancer believes that the consultation and the framework are an impressive attempt to implement a structured system. Therefore, two of the biggest cancer charities are not overtly critical of what is happening. Instead, they are welcoming it. However, they are asking that that be tweaked and that another wee step be taken in the right direction so that we can take a holistic approach to dealing with issues that are associated with cancer.

Some Members rightly highlighted and commended the work of carers and people who work in that field. In common with Members who spoke previously, I, and my extended family, have been directly and indirectly affected by cancer. Carers and people working in the hospices and other institutions cannot be paid enough. At every opportunity, we should commend the work that those people do.

As I said, I hope that the Health Minister will get time to read the Hansard report. Therefore, I will read a recommendation that NICE makes in its supportive and palliative care guidance. That states:

"Systems should be in place to direct patients to expert advice on benefits, including support in completing application forms."

One minute the Health Department representatives are saying that the NICE guidelines do not suit them, but the next minute they are saying that they do. At the Health Committee meeting last week, the Chief Medical Officer tried to use the NICE guidelines when he talked about drugs for arthritis and other such issues. If NICE says that something needs to be done, it needs to be done; people cannot cherry-pick what they think NICE wants them to do.

2.45 pm

Alex Easton and his colleague Jonathan Bell highlighted the psychological impact of cancer and the impact of travel on cancer patients and their wider families. The motion calls for on-site financial aid to try to take that burden away.

I do not know whether it is in order to ask, but can we find out whether the Business Committee was formally told that the Health Minister would not be here for the debate? Samuel Gardiner criticised the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their absence from the Chamber yesterday, and that is his prerogative. However, at least they had the decency to write to the Speaker yesterday morning to apologise for their absence. As far as I am aware, the Health Minister did not write to the Speaker to tell him that he would not be here. The Health Minister found the time to take part in a private Member's motion yesterday, as a private Member. We are being told that he is not available on Monday and Tuesday to deal with health issues, so how was he able to free up time yesterday to take part in a private Member's motion? I do not want to be seen as critical of the Health Minister, but he is walking into criticism; he should have been here to answer some of the questions that have been asked.

Dolores Kelly and George Robinson highlighted the proactive work that is being done and commended the staff involved. I want to be associated with those comments.

We are all well aware that other Committees need to step up to the mark to address the issue raised in the motion. Simon Hamilton's contribution on behalf of the Social Development Committee was useful. He said 85% of the cancer patients that Macmillan Cancer Support deals with are living in fuel poverty and outlined what the DSD Committee is doing to address that. We should welcome the work of other Committees. However, if we are talking about a collective approach to health — Minister McGimpsey is well aware of, and is always talking about, a collective approach to health — he needs to come in here and let us work with him.

It might be useful for Simon Hamilton, as Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, to ensure that relevant information is forwarded to the Health

Committee. Other Committees are making small and important steps that have a positive impact on cancer patients and cancer charities. The statistics provided by Mr Hamilton were some of the most useful pieces of information to come out of the debate, particularly for me, because I am dealing with cancer patients who are living in fuel poverty.

All in all, the debate has been useful. Neither I nor my party colleagues are going to stop tabling motions on health issues just because the Minister will not come to the House for them. The Speaker and the Business Committee need to take on board that the Minister's time should be freed up when there are issues to discuss. If the Minister decides not to attend just for the sake of it, it should be made clear that the Chamber is where Ministers and MLAs are held to account, so he should be asked why he is refusing to attend important health debates in the Assembly. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that people undergoing treatment for cancer can find themselves vulnerable to poverty because of their changed circumstances; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, as part of his service framework for cancer prevention, treatment and care, to provide access to quality, on-site financial aid and advice services for people undergoing such treatment.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Faith-based Organisations

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.

Miss McIlveen: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the range of services provided by Churches and faith-based groups in Northern Ireland, particularly in traditionally hard-to-reach communities; notes the findings of the 'Faith in Wales: Counting for Communities' report; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to commission a similar study to quantify the contribution made by these organisations across Northern Ireland.

None of us should underestimate the positive impact that faith communities have on wider society. Sadly, wider society does exactly that. I am sure that all Members in the Chamber have some contact with faith-based groups in their day-to-day constituency work. That contact may be through dealing with individuals who were referred to Members by those groups, hosting or speaking at events for them or even assisting with difficulties that they encounter individually. Beyond that, Churches and faith-based organisations are well established and have built up relationships of trust in local communities that enable them to carry out valuable work in areas where statutory services have been ineffective.

Although it is impossible to outline every area of action in which such organisations are now involved, it goes far beyond the simple stereotyping of the Sunday morning service, Sunday school and the Boys' Brigade. Those are mainstays of Christian faith-based organisations, and youth work is an important component of the services that they offer. For example, in Comber in my own constituency, a Youth for Christ drop-in centre called The Net was opened in February 1998. It sought to engage effectively with young people outside church congregations. That is known as detached youth work, and one of its key areas of work is addressing antisocial behaviour.

The 2005 research report into faith-based youth work in Northern Ireland, which was commissioned by a faith-based interest group called YouthNet, noted that 68% of registered youth groups in Northern Ireland were faith- or church-based and involved around 90,000 young people. Amazingly, the volunteers in that area are sometimes overlooked when figures are discussed. According to the report, 22,109 people gave their time freely to help in youth work through faith-based organisations. That accounts for 74.4% of the total volunteers in youth work. Although I have referred to

the report, I should point out that it is limited in scope, and I suggest that any assessment should be significantly broader. However, it provides an indication of the numbers that are involved in such work.

As I said, youth work is only part of the work that faith-based communities undertake. They are now involved in a wide range of social matters and projects that seek to reduce drug abuse and assist victims of crime, including domestic violence. Important work is carried out on rehabilitation of ex-prisoners and paramilitary groups. In addition, such groups undertake schemes that cover such diverse areas as parent/toddler groups, lunch clubs and support networks. Moreover, we should not forget those who are involved in hospital visits, prisoner visits and employment training.

I will use another example from my own constituency. The Link Family and Community Centre was formed by a Presbyterian Church in Newtownards in January 1997. It offers a wide range of services, including support for people who are suffering as a result of long-term addiction to alcohol or drugs. It provides an educationally stimulating location for toddlers and offers a senior citizens' lunch club and community development projects. Project 23 provides support, facilities and activities for young people.

The Vine Centre was established in one of the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland in north Belfast in 1970. It offers an advice centre, after-school clubs, family education, a women's project, lunch clubs, senior citizens' meetings, adult education classes and a volunteer development programme.

The role and impact of volunteering is sometimes overlooked. However, it makes an important contribution to community life in general. Although volunteering has obvious benefits for a person who is taken out on social trips or kept company by a transport companion, it also acts as a means of building and maintaining skills for people who have been unemployed, and faith-based groups are a means through which that happens. Although we could list the fantastic services and praise their impact on wider society, we simply cannot categorically state what impact they have or detail with certainty all the services that are offered and the number of people who avail themselves of those services.

The motion refers to the findings of the 'Faith in Wales: Counting for Communities' report. The rationale behind that was that there was little statistical evidence of the services that are provided by faith-based communities, as is the case in Northern Ireland. The report provides a breakdown of the faith communities in Wales along with their geographical location and shows how many of those communities are located in areas of high levels of deprivation.

The report provides evidence of the numbers of people who attend faith communities, the numbers of volunteers organised in those communities, the hours devoted to assisting others, and the services that are currently offered by faith communities, as well as those that they hope to offer in the future. The report also considers involvement in cultural and sporting activities and the use of various organisations' premises by the wider community.

Apart from those direct services, however, the report scrutinises the responsibility of faith-based communities for buildings of historical interest that can generate tourism in the areas in which they are situated. The report attempts to estimate the numbers of visitors to such sites. Furthermore, it makes economic estimates of the contribution that is made by faith-based communities, showing the value of the community work that is undertaken, the value of paid work, the value of the tourism that is generated, and the supply of premises. The report concludes by detailing the involvement of faith communities in government initiatives and highlights how such communities are mainly self-funding. The report shows that only 27% of such communities in Wales receive any funding from public sources.

There are evident benefits in carrying out similar exercises in Northern Ireland, where arguably there is an even greater proportion of people involved in such work. It is important that we be aware of the extent of the role that is played by such organisations. That can be achieved by gathering clear statistical data so that an assessment can be made of their contribution. Using that as a base, we can expand to create workable, two-way relationships between those communities and the Assembly.

We should appreciate that there are very few groups that have such a well-established structure in areas that public services have, traditionally, found hard to reach. There is capacity in those groups not only to gather and disseminate information to their communities, but to assist in delivering those services. It is only when we truly appreciate the work that is being undertaken by such communities and organisations that we can maximise the potential of any two-way relationship. To do that would require an audit similar to that outlined in the Welsh example.

One of the challenges faced by faith-based organisations that I and undoubtedly other Members have come across is the reluctance of such organisations to avail themselves of lottery funding to support what they do because that conflicts with their ethos. Having spoken to many of those groups in my Strangford constituency, I know that they do not even consider the option of applying for lottery funding. An audit that shows how those organisations are funded and outlines the difficulties that they experience may assist the

Assembly in considering alternative funding streams for those organisations that cannot access lottery funding on moral grounds.

I note that a member of the Minister for Social Development's party raised that concern in the House of Commons on 3 June 2009. During a supplementary question to the Minister of State, he recognised the valuable role that is played by Churches and faith-based groups to local communities and wider society in Northern Ireland. I hope, therefore, that I will have the support of the Minister and her party for the motion. Indeed, on 28 April 2008, the Minister said that:

"Faith based organisations have much to offer working in partnership with statutory and voluntary organisations to address the worst examples of social deprivation, prejudice and poverty."

I am sure that, with such recognition of what they can offer, she will agree that, in order to maximise any potential partnership, an assessment of the capacity and contribution of such organisations is essential. We can consider the £20 million Skainos urban regeneration project on the lower Newtownards Road in east Belfast, which developed out of the work of the East Belfast Mission. That shows the type of positive fruit that such partnerships can bear. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 3.00 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until that time. When the debate resumes, I will call Mr Mickey Brady.

The debate stood suspended.

3.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Staffing

1. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of his plan to redeploy 90 members of staff within his Department due to his reduced budget, how this can be reconciled with the large number of high-earning civil servants in his Department.

(AQO 693/10)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): My Department, in common with all other Departments, has had to make savings to enable it to live within the available funding for 2010-11. That will mean a reduction in the number of civil servants employed by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). That reduction will be achieved by redeploying about 48 staff, or 2%, of the Department's workforce. The Department is also on course to reduce Senior Civil Service posts by 10% compared with the number at the start of this financial year. As the Member will know, 10% significantly exceeds the proportion of other staff who are being redeployed.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his answer. Over the years, we often heard that public sector salary levels were to be compared with the private sector. In light of the economic downturn and current financial climate, will the Minister carry out a review to appraise salaries at the most senior level throughout the public sector, given that the job losses are primarily at the coalface?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The last part of the Member's question demonstrates that she did not listen to my previous answer. The job losses will not be primarily at the coalface: the number of senior civil servants will reduce by 10%, and the number of staff in the rest of the Department will reduce by 2%.

However, the Member raised a good point. Although she does not like to give me too much credit for anything, I hope that she realises that of all the Finance Ministers across the United Kingdom, I have led the way in examining senior salaries. Indeed, even though the Senior Salaries Review Body recommended the payment of bonuses, Northern Ireland is the only place in which those bonuses have not been implemented. That was my decision, and I made it because it was important to examine the level of pay for senior posts.

There is now talk at Westminster of a salary freeze for senior civil servants next year. That will be fed through by the Senior Salaries Review Body, and we will be linked to that. I hope that the Member recognises that we have not ignored the issue.

Mr Weir: When does the Minister expect the redeployment exercise to be finalised and details of surplus staff to become available?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I hope that it will be finalised by the end of next week. Initially, we will seek to redeploy staff rather than having to make people redundant. Given the high level of turnover in the Northern Ireland Civil Service — from memory, it amounts to about 900 posts a year, although if that figure is wrong, I will correct it — there is always hope that we will be able to redeploy people in various Departments.

Mr K Robinson: The House is always sorry to hear of any job losses, although we note that the generals as well as the infantry are taking their cut. However, will the Minister assure the House that the function and performance of his Department will not suffer as a result of those job losses?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The job of all Ministers is to ensure that although economies must be made, any reductions are examined in light of service delivery. However the reductions are implemented, Ministers must ensure that their impact on service delivery is kept to an absolute minimum.

For that reason, to prevent maximum impact on service delivery, we are considering from where surplus staff in the Department can best be identified. We shall then seek to implement redeployments. All Ministers would seek to do that rather than opt for the first reduction that occurs to them regardless of impact.

Dr Farry: To what extent does the Minister recognise a failure in our local labour market? Our top talent is attracted to the public sector because it has the best terms and conditions and less risk. What efforts is the Minister making, in conjunction with other Ministers, to ensure that we have a more balanced labour market and that our top people are attracted not only to the public sector but to the private sector, in order to grow our economy?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That is linked to an answer that I gave earlier. We recognise that there are some distortions. We want to attract the best people into the public service. There is no point in having the public service staffed by people who are second-rate. I believe that we attract very good staff to the upper echelons of the Civil Service. However, the Member makes an important point, which is that that cannot happen at the expense of distorting the labour market or of making the public sector the only attractive proposition for people with skills and ability.

I took a proposal to the Executive that we should examine bonuses and the bonus culture throughout the public sector, not just in the ranks of the Civil Service. Ministers are now obliged to apply to DFP when they wish to pay bonuses to staff. Some bonuses are contractual, so there is no way that we can get out of paying those, but, in other cases, my Department has refused to permit bonus payments to be made. That is at least a first step. The other structural issue that the Member raised must be dealt with by the wider review of public sector pay, into which we have an input but for which we do not have total responsibility.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

INTERREG IV: Portrush

3. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when EU INTERREG IV funding will be released for a technical study for the Portrush regeneration project. (AQO 695/10)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I hope that the funding for the project can be released fairly soon. The technical study for the Portrush regeneration project is part of the wider Sail West project, which has been allocated €7 million of INTERREG IVa funding. Donegal County Council is the lead partner for the project.

The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) issued a letter of offer to the Sail West project on 1 December 2009, but that has not yet been signed and returned. On 12 January 2010, Donegal County Council advised SEUPB of staffing changes and asked for the letter to be reissued. That was done on 27 January 2010, not provoked by the fact that this question had been tabled but because the Department has a quick and efficient turnaround. Money can begin to flow to the project when that letter has been signed and returned, together with a copy of the required partnership agreement among Donegal County Council, Coleraine Borough Council for the Portrush element, and the other Sail West partners. Those are matters for the project partners and not for my Department.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for that welcome announcement. This is quite a significant project in one of — if not the — premier tourism and leisure resorts in Northern Ireland. Given the good news that the Minister has been able to announce, and the fact that he is waiting for the response, will he tell us whether any of the individual economic appraisals have details outstanding? If there are, will he task his officials to assist in finding a speedy resolution in order to bring the project to fruition?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Information is and will continue to be required for the 15 individual elements of the project.

Of course, SEUPB is always happy to help where there are difficulties in the applications process. It is not in our interests for funds to be delayed; we want to spend the money.

I know that a number of Members are concerned about this issue, but we are up to date with the spending of funds. There is no reason for us to delay spending at a time when we want to have as much investment in the economy as possible. However, there are elements that cannot be dealt with by the Department. In the cases of partnership arrangements, especially those with many elements, all the partners must come together to complete the applications so that money can start to flow.

Mr McClarty: Given the importance of Portrush and the Causeway Coast to Northern Ireland's overall tourism provision, does the Minister not accept that emergency financial action by the Executive is required beyond the Portrush regeneration scheme? The town was ranked fifty-sixth out of 59 in a recent UK-wide survey.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As the Member knows, my Department is responsible for the Peace III and INTERREG IVa elements of any spending. Other Ministers are responsible for any wider regeneration and spending issues, whether they relate to tourism, urban regeneration or whatever. The Member did not mention any specific projects, but having been in Portrush at the weekend, I can confirm his point.

There is a lot of dereliction in Portrush, especially in the main street. Therefore, a lot of work needs to be done in what is one of Northern Ireland's main tourist areas. That work will be done in conjunction with local authorities and a range of Departments. My Department wishes to move the Sail West project along. I hope that the issues that are still to be resolved, including those in relation to the partnership agreements, will be dealt with quickly so that the money can be released.

Mr Gallagher: Does the Minister agree that territorial cohesion is a central theme of EU policy? Will he tell the House whether that theme is reflected in his Department's thinking on all-Ireland infrastructure generally?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I cannot remember the exact percentage, but a lot of the INTERREG funding will be channelled through the five cross-border groups. I met some of the cross-border groups in November 2009, and they expressed concerns about the delay in funding. I undertook to see what could be done, and all the groups have now received offers for their administration costs. Some groups have received offers for particular projects, and a number of offers should be made to individual projects in the next five or six months. About €50 million should be allocated to individual projects as a result of the offers.

When we talk about cross-border co-operation, we are not just referring to co-operation between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland. Increasingly, cross-border co-operation also refers to co-operation with councils in Scotland. That is important for the areas such as that which my friend from East Londonderry Mr McClarty talked about and, indeed, East Antrim. I have done my best to move that forward, as I promised I would when I met the groups, and we are beginning to see some results.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister tell us how many projects, in his Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, have been hindered due to the delays in the INTERREG IVa funding? How much money is involved in those projects?

3.15 pm

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There is not a massive delay. I have the figures: by the end of last year, the INTERREG IVa and PEACE III programmes had between them approved 139 projects worth €267 million. That means that we are up to date; we are not lagging behind in expenditure.

A number of Members from across the House have raised this with me, and I told them that I had no evidence that there were considerable delays. I spoke to the head of SEUPB, and we discussed it when we met on a North/South forum basis. I was assured that every effort was being made to ensure that the money was spent on time. The figures that we have available indicate that we are in place to spend the money. Of course, there are a number of major projects, some of which have been a bit slow. INTERREG IVa especially has been characterised by large projects that take much longer to evaluate and to get the information together on.

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises: Finance

4. **Lord Browne** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he is taking to assist small and medium-sized enterprises to access capital.

(AQO 696/10)

5. **Mr B Wilson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what success he has had in persuading banks to extend credit to small and medium-sized enterprises, and to increase liquidity within the economy.

(AQO 697/10)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 5 together.

As the chairperson of the Executive's cross-sector advisory forum banking group, I have convened a number of meetings of key stakeholders on this issue.

There is mounting evidence to suggest that local banks have adopted a conservative approach to lending to local businesses. That makes it increasingly difficult for them to maintain cash flow and investment requirements. I have, therefore, worked with the Institute of Directors and Invest Northern Ireland to develop a quick guide to accessing finance. That guide has now been circulated to local firms through the various business organisations, and that initiative will assist local firms in their engagements with banks.

I have also formally raised the matter of bank lending with the Treasury Ministers, and the issue is to be raised at the bank lending panel, which is chaired by the Chancellor. While strengthening their own balance sheets, local banks should also ensure that they give support to local businesses. Without strong local businesses, our economy will be weak.

Lord Browne: I thank the Minister for his answer and congratulate him on his efforts to help small businesses in this difficult economic climate. The business community appreciates the support provided by the enterprise finance guarantee scheme. Can the Minister give me any information on the uptake of that scheme? Is he satisfied that participating banks provide sufficient information to their small business customers?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am not happy with the uptake of the scheme. Whether one considers the number of loans or the value of them, I can say only that Northern Ireland is performing abominably. Only 81 loans have been offered so far in Northern Ireland: that compares with the situation in Wales, where 384 have been offered; in Scotland, 515; the north-east of England, 253; and the south-east of England, over 1,000. Clearly, even though we are a smaller region, the uptake per 100 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) has been low in Northern Ireland. Through the cross-sector advisory forum, I have taken this matter up with local banks to ask what they can do, and what they are doing, to promote the scheme with their customers. Equally important, for it is the other side of the equation, I have contacted the business organisations to encourage them to get their members to inquire of banks about the scheme's availability.

Mr B Wilson: I thank the Minister for his response. Obviously he has been active in this respect.

Last week, I spoke to a member of the Bangor Chamber of Commerce, who suggested that bank lending had not changed since the Minister had last spoken with the banks, and that some long-established businesses were in danger of going out of business because of cash flow problems. Is the Minister monitoring what the banks are doing? Has he any evidence of a change in bank lending since he spoke to the banks last?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member raised an important issue. There is no point in relating anecdotes. All the banks are represented on the banking subgroup of the cross-sector advisory forum. People had been relaying stories that they had heard about particular businesses, but all that information was highly anecdotal. Therefore, the Institute of Directors and other business organisations surveyed their members. To ensure that the banks could not wriggle out of the process, the institute spoke to them first to ascertain the kind of questions with which they would be happy. That collusion meant that the banks could not complain that the institute was asking the wrong questions.

The survey painted a fairly bleak picture: 44% of those who responded said that lending conditions had become worse. Importantly, however, we now have an evidence base, which is what the Member was getting at. As for what can be done, action can be taken at three levels. I do not want to over-egg the pudding: we cannot force banks to do something that they do not wish to do. First, however, we can, through the advisory forum, talk to the heads of the various banks. Secondly, I raised the issue with the Treasury Minister. Thirdly, during a quadrilateral meeting, I spoke to all the other Finance Ministers in the United Kingdom. The information that my officials send to the Treasury is now an item on the agenda of the lending panel, which is chaired by the Treasury Minister. In that way, at least we get access to those at the top, and we have the ear of people who may well have some influence on the banks.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister ensure that investment is made in organisations that lend to social economy businesses?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The social economy is represented on the banking subgroup of the cross-sector advisory forum. Its representatives have raised issues and highlighted the difficulties that they experience. Many of them made it clear that their businesses are sound and that they have a good market and strong base. They also pointed out that they benefit their local areas in many other ways through injecting their profits into socially worthwhile projects.

Although some of the issues facing the social economy are the same as those facing small businesses, others are peculiar to that sector. However, at least we have a means by which we can measure that sector's problems and relay its concerns to the banking industry. The sector has considered how credit unions may be able to help them. Often, social economy businesses share a common interest in their local areas with that particular source of finance.

Ms Lo: Does the Minister agree that the best way to grow the economy is to help SMEs to develop and export to other markets? In what way does the Minister envisage

his Department supporting the recommendations of the recent Barnett report?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The implementation of the Barnett report's recommendations is a matter for the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. My Department will listen to any of the Minister's proposals, particularly those that have financial implications. If a business case is presented, we will, of course, consider that, as we do any other application.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Shannon is not in his place to ask question 6.

Employment: Job Creation

7. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he is taking to protect public service jobs and to promote job creation within the construction sector, given that unemployment now stands at 54,500 and the number of people claiming jobseeker's allowance has increased by 50% in the past year. (AQO 699/10)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are two parts to the Member's question. As far as the Civil Service posts are concerned, I outlined in my response to an earlier question how we are considering what efficiencies must be made across Departments. We will, of course, examine how those efficiencies can be made without having a direct impact on service delivery.

At present, 30% of those who are registered as unemployed are from the construction industry. The Executive and I recognise the impact that the economic downturn, particularly in the housing market, has had on that industry.

That is one reason why we have spent more on capital investment this year than ever — up by about £1 million a day to overall spending that now amounts to £1.7 billion. When they hear uninformed, misinformed and, sometimes, malicious comments that the Assembly and the Executive are doing nothing for the unemployed, people should remember that 54% of people employed in the construction industry — it used to be 32% — are working on public sector projects, because the Executive moved quickly to bring forward spending to try to fill the gap.

We have not been able to fill it totally, and I do not think that anybody could reasonably expect us to do so. However, we have at least sought to address the problem, and, as a result of our action, far more people in the construction industry have been spared unemployment than would otherwise have been the case.

Mr Gardiner: I point out for the Minister's benefit that there has been considerable foot dragging by the Department of Education on two major projects in my

constituency, namely Lurgan College and Portadown College. That has had a big impact on construction work in my area. Will the Minister assure the Assembly that there is no unwritten policy of capital project delays, steered by his Department, which does not have Executive clearance?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I give the Member an absolute assurance that my Department has no policy of delaying capital projects. I often get letters, including from Members of every party in the House, accusing DFP of dragging its heels and taking ages to deal with business cases that have been presented to it. In most of the instances that I have investigated, the business cases never came to us.

I have made it clear to officials that business cases from Departments are to be dealt with as quickly as possible. Hopefully, they come with all the information that allows DFP to clear them. If they do not and there are further questions to be asked, I seek to make that turnaround as quick as possible. Do not forget that the preparation of the business case and answering queries about it is the responsibility of the parent Department. The only undertaking that I can give is that DFP will not drag its heels in dealing with business cases.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is there further scope in the Executive to bring forward public work schemes that provide opportunities for construction firms? How would the Minister respond to a call from a local company that has a proven track record in the construction field but which is not affiliated with or registered to Constructionline and which, therefore, does not qualify for public sector opportunities?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I do not know the company. The Member may wish to write to me about the project, but his question is couched in such vague terms that he would not expect me to answer. Without knowing the details — even if he had given me the name of the construction company — I would not have hazarded a guess. However, I would be happy to look at the issue for him.

We have brought forward by years a great deal of capital spending in order to find opportunities and to bring forward capital projects. However, one must be prudent about not creating a spending hole for years to come, particularly when we know that there will be capital cuts after the next election, with the tightening of the Budget.

However, there are advantages in bringing capital projects forward at this time. Costs have been reduced so much — we sometimes get 20% discounts — that it makes more sense to spend the money now than to wait until there is an upturn and prices go up again. That judgement must be made.

The publication on the website of the investment strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI) delivery tracking system (DTS) portal gives firms good advance warning of what public projects are coming down the line so that those companies can prepare to make bids. We have tried to make the procurement process and the pre-qualification process, which can be time-consuming, as simple as possible. Once inputted, information does not need to be put in time and time again.

We have tried to cut down even those procurement costs for firms.

3.30 pm

Mr Bell: I thank the Minister for the work that his Department has already done to assist the construction sector. As he knows, my constituency of Strangford has experienced major difficulties in that area. Given that apprenticeships and the local economy in Strangford are so dependent on the construction industry, will the Minister's Department and the Executive continue to prioritise construction work?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We are aware of the need for continuity, which is why we have framework directives whereby firms can secure long-term work. We also have a website on which upcoming projects are published so that firms can plan ahead for capital investment and employee training.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Suggestion Boxes

1. **Ms J McCann** asked the Assembly Commission how many suggestions have been received, to date, via the suggestion boxes. (AQO 705/10)

Mr Neeson: On 8 October 2009, as part of the wider internal communications initiative, suggestion boxes were introduced in Parliament Buildings and Annexe C to provide an additional feedback method for secretariat staff. To date, 89 questions, suggestions and comments have been received through the boxes. That input has come not only from secretariat staff but from MLAs and party support staff. All entries are seen by the Clerk/Director General, and responses are issued to all individuals who supply a name. All responses are placed on AssISt, the Assembly's intranet facility.

Ms J McCann: Have any suggestions been made about introducing Irish language signage in Parliament Buildings and the Stormont estate, and will the Commission follow up on any such suggestions as part of its obligations under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages? The subject is significant

because many schoolchildren who visit Parliament Buildings are from Irish-medium schools.

Mr Neeson: I am pleased that the Member raised that issue because, on 21 January 2010, the Assembly Commission agreed a good relations action plan to address its statutory duty under section 75(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The next stage in progressing the plan is for Directors to consider the impact of actions in the plan on their directorate and to further submit actions for completion at directorate level. Following that, the Commission will consult on the plan with a range of relevant section 75 groups. The plan includes actions that look at language and signage. For example, in May 2010, work will commence on developing a language policy, which will also address signage.

In addition, to ensure that a welcoming atmosphere is apparent in Parliament Buildings, the Assembly Commission is committed to conducting an internal good relations audit and framework, which will commence in February 2010, and a forum will be established to address issues arising from that internal audit. Furthermore, through an external good relations audit and consultation with relevant groups, the Commission will consider whether barriers exist or have been encountered when accessing services. I hope that that answers the Member's question.

Mr Kinahan: Has the Commission looked at any other ways to elicit suggestions, such as via electronic means?

Mr Neeson: Yes. We have been looking at other methods, particularly those that utilise electronic means. We keep the matter under continual review, because we want to ensure that Assembly facilities meet all the requirements not only of elected Members but of staff.

Ms Lo: Recently, I inquired about organising a wedding in Stormont, and I was told that only Christian weddings are allowed in this Building. Will the Commission consider extending that provision to make it more inclusive and to allow civil weddings to take place?

Mr Neeson: I welcome that issue being raised. If the Assembly is going to create real outreach, it must include all religions and nationalities. Therefore, I will raise the issue on behalf of the Member at the next meeting of the Assembly Commission.

Blue Flax Restaurant

2. **Mr Burns** asked the Assembly Commission what action Eurest has taken to address issues and complaints raised during the last customer survey about the Blue Flax restaurant. (AQO 706/10)

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The Commission has been advised that Eurest received no specific complaints in the customer survey that was carried out in January 2009. The survey data proved to be of assistance in the development of an action plan by Eurest to further improve the services provided. Its plan focused on the small percentage of comments that were marked as fair to poor. The survey was issued again in January 2010, and it is envisaged that the results will allow Eurest to carry out a comparative analysis on levels of customer satisfaction between 2009 and 2010.

Mr Burns: How many complaints have been received about the cost of items in the vending machines, and what measures have the Commission put in place to ensure that the prices of drinks and snacks in the vending machines are similar to the prices that are charged in shops?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I do not have those details to hand, but I will ensure that the Member receives an answer in writing.

Mr Gardiner: What provision has the Commission made for the ongoing review of food services in Parliament Buildings?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: We continually review Members' catering needs and look at how we can improve the service and carry it forward. We are looking forward to the results of the most recent questionnaire, and we will inform the House as soon as that information is available.

Ormiston House

3. **Mr McCallister** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on Ormiston House. (AQO 707/10)

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Ormiston House has been at the forefront of the Assembly's thinking for some time. The Assembly Commission has agreed to explore options for the disposal of Ormiston House to ensure best value for money for the public purse. Officials from the Northern Ireland Assembly met the Planning Service on 7 January 2010 to discuss revised development proposals for the Ormiston House site. A formal request to the Planning Service in respect of those proposals was made on 26 January 2010, and the Planning Service has committed to giving a definitive response by the end of February 2010. A soft market testing exercise has also been taking place, but, to date, no firm interest in purchasing the property has been registered.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to Dr Coulter for his reply on behalf of the Commission. Have local residents been kept fully informed?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I can give a positive response to that. As a member of the Commission who has been involved with the Ormiston House problem from the

beginning, I know that we agreed that residents would be kept fully informed. In fact, residents have been kept informed of progress at regular meetings with Assembly staff, the most recent of which took place in early January 2010 at Parliament Buildings. We intend to continue to keep residents fully informed of progress that is being made to develop the site.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Parliament Buildings: Recycling

5. **Mr McKay** asked the Assembly Commission what measures are in place to encourage recycling in the Assembly. (AQO 709/10)

Mr Neeson: I am aware that Daithí McKay has a keen interest in environmental issues in the Assembly. He has submitted quite a number of written questions to the Commission.

Measures to encourage recycling in the Assembly include the use of recycling points and awareness communications to staff. Recycling points are sited throughout Parliament Buildings and at Annexe C in kitchens and in most offices. Items to be recycled include office paper, newspapers, magazines, coffee cups, plastics, food and drinks cans and glass. The Assembly also recycles cardboard, electrical equipment, batteries, toner cartridges, printer consumables and cooking oil from kitchens.

Postmasters are issued periodically to encourage staff to recycle the waste that they generate. Additionally, e-mail messages and updates in team briefs are included to reinforce that message.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Neeson for his comprehensive answer. A number of MLAs also serve on councils and are aware of recycling targets that are set for councils. Has the Assembly Commission considered being more proactive in that field and setting targets for the Assembly?

Mr Neeson: The Member's question has two aspects. First, figures that are provided by waste contractors suggest that about 35% of waste generated in Parliament Buildings is recycled. Do we want to increase that percentage? The answer is yes. Measures are planned to improve recycling rates and signage at recycling points and to introduce additional recycling points and waste streams to be recycled. For example, it is hoped that food waste recycling will be introduced in March or April 2010.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In his answer, Mr Neeson mentioned many items to be recycled. Has the Commission any intention to recycle MLAs at all?

Mr Neeson: I am afraid that that responsibility is beyond the Commission's control. However, I shall raise the issue at the next Commission meeting.

Mr Cree: Has the Commission plans to recycle the cigarette butts and empty packets that are discarded outside the West Door?

Mr Neeson: The Member raises an issue that troubles me, as one who is concerned about smoking in public areas, such as outside the West Door. I know from a council perspective that smoking is allowed only in areas that are well away from the local facility. That should also be the case at Parliament Buildings.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Michelle O'Neill is not in her place. That concludes Questions to the Assembly Commission and Question Time. We now return to the debate on faith-based organisations.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Faith-based Organisations

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the range of services provided by Churches and faith-based groups in Northern Ireland, particularly in traditionally hard-to-reach communities; notes the findings of the 'Faith in Wales: Counting for Communities' report; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to commission a similar study to quantify the contribution made by these organisations across Northern Ireland.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. There is no doubt that Churches and faith-based organisations make a significant contribution to society in the North, and that should be acknowledged. There is evidence to suggest that faith-based organisations comprise a significant proportion of the charity sector. Many faith-based organisations provide benefits that are not always immediately recognised, instilling a sense of belonging, purpose, meaning and community identity and offering life skills and pastoral guidance and promoting good citizenship and healthy lifestyles.

3.45 pm

Faith-based organisations provide a real and important presence in communities and high levels of voluntary action. The organisations are historically linked to a social care and justice initiatives. They deal with a lot of contemporary social problems, such as alcohol and drug addiction, homelessness and domestic violence. Representatives from the organisations visit hospitals, hospices and prisons and provide support for Third World countries. Faith-based organisations are one of the largest sectors involving volunteers across a wide range of activities, such as youth and children's work, befriending, luncheon clubs and transport.

A consultation paper on the volunteering strategy that was published by DSD in July 2009 states that there is a need to enhance linkages between the faith-based sector and the volunteering infrastructure in order to provide better support and information in relation to the involvement of volunteers.

It is interesting to look at some of the statistics involved. In 2005, there were 1,405 registered faith-based and church-based groups here, with a total of 98,902 members, 16,457 volunteer leaders and 160 full-time youth workers. Some 68% of registered youth groups are faith- and church-based, and 57.8% of all members of registered youth groups are participants in faith-based youth groups.

There are some good models of faith-based youth work targeting social need, and there is potential for those groups to target social need in a more strategic way. There is also evidence of faith-based youth groups contributing to social capital in local communities

through, for instance, citizenship, community participation, volunteering trusts and social cohesion.

There is also evidence of faith-based youth work here in the North bridging social capital across the sectarian divide. I have met faith-based cross-community groups who have visited the Assembly, and I have been impressed by their motivation and enthusiasm for promoting a shared future. Those groups are actively promoting a peaceful and inclusive society that is based on equality, diversity and interdependence.

I worked in an advice centre in the voluntary sector for many years, and I had occasion to come into contact with many faith-based groups, such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul. That group provides much-needed assistance and support for the most vulnerable in our society. In 1988, when the social fund was introduced to replace single payment grants, some people who were on very low incomes and who had little or no resources to provide essential household items did not qualify for community care grants. St Vincent de Paul stepped in, helped those people and made sure that they did not go without.

I am a member of the Social Development Committee, which was involved in the scrutiny of the Charities Bill. I was surprised and enlightened to discover the number of faith-based groups here in the North and the wide diversity of the work that they do. That work contributes to our society in an important and meaningful way, and I call on the Minister for Social Development to commission a study to quantify the contribution that is made by those organisations. Such a study would also be relevant in the development of a coherent and cohesive strategy on volunteering.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Member for proposing the motion and for giving the House an opportunity to formally acknowledge the beneficial work that so many of our Churches and faith-based groups do on a daily basis. I declare an interest as an officer in the First Raloo Boys' Brigade and as a committee member of Raloo Presbyterian Church. In fact, I hope to continue my community service to young people this evening when I assist at the Boys' Brigade.

Historically, the Protestant and Catholic Churches played a crucial role in the peace process. During the Troubles, however, I acknowledge that some individuals expressed distorted views, as is the case with the Taliban. In the midst of a terrorist campaign, when bombs and murder were a weekly or even daily occurrence, people often turned to their churches in the knowledge that they would usually provide a sanctuary from what was happening on the streets.

The proposer of the motion referred to the Welsh report and the impact that faith-based organisations in Wales have had on wider society. That report surprised many people when it was published. Few had expected

that the report would make such a big impression and illustrate how much the faith-based and church-based organisations mattered in Wales. There was a common perception that Welsh chapels were closing and that participation in the Church was declining.

The report showed that the faith community contributed £102 million to the Welsh economy each year and that, if a similar trend were to extend across the rest of the United Kingdom, the overall figure could be over £2 billion. I am confident that it would be a worthwhile exercise if the Department for Social Development were to put together a detailed report that stated the economic and social benefits of our faith-based organisations. I understand that the cost of doing so has been estimated at about £50,000, based on 2006 figures. Surely, that is a relatively small sum, given the significant contribution in volunteer hours given by faith-based organisations, which have made a wide contribution to community development, education heritage and social exclusion. As such, they would be a key area for the engagement of statutory services, and such a report could draw that out.

The 2006 research report commissioned by Youthnet, a faith-based group, revealed that there were 1,405 registered faith- or church-based groups, with just under 100,000 members. That demonstrates that those groups have a significant influence on Northern Ireland with its population of 1.7 million.

Many Members will recall going to Sunday school, Guides, Boys' and Girls' Brigade and Cubs in their younger days — I was a Cub once myself. Many will look back with fondness and gratitude for the skills that they developed from their involvement with those groups. My children have benefited from youth organisations, particularly through the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, which opened up new horizons to them, including community service.

I am aware of the constructive role played by the YMCA in working with young people in Carrickfergus and Larne. The YMCA successfully established basic education courses at Sunnylands Youth Centre, which the local further education college failed to do. I pay tribute to Woodlands Presbyterian Church, which opened up its facilities to the local community on a number of occasions. Church members are involved with the Genesis project involving young people at Whitehead and the GRASP project in Greenisland, which has constructive engagement with young people.

Many Churches here have had a long tradition of encouraging their members to assist the local community; for example, Good Morning, Carrickfergus, which is in the Church of the Nazarene, and Good Morning, Larne, which helps isolated individuals in our community. The YMCA's Parents and Kids Together programme is funded with the help of several bodies, including local

Churches and their volunteers. The commitment displayed by our faith-based organisations is difficult to find in other walks of life.

Our religious organisations assist more than just our young people, and Members referred to the Salvation Army and the Society of St Vincent de Paul. It is vital that we do not let political correctness impede their work. Other Members referred to lottery funding, which can be a stumbling block to accessing funding. Equally, we must ensure that funding barriers do not impede the work of volunteers, and there is a need to review the funding of such groups.

Mr Burns: I welcome the motion and the opportunity to speak in the debate. Members will agree that it is good to see the contribution of faith-based organisations being recognised in the Assembly.

We are talking mostly about the Christian Churches in Northern Ireland, which are well established in every part of our community and represent all denominations, rich or poor, in urban and rural areas. In many cases, Churches have been serving their communities for hundreds of years.

Although the Churches are important, there are many other fine examples of charities, volunteer and non-profit making organisations that do a great job, such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army. As Members said, those organisations make a valuable contribution in many different ways. Although most people can relate to what their local Church does, it is fair to say that, as the motion states, we have no hard statistical evidence to give us the big picture.

My local Church undertakes a great deal of work on the ground, and many other Churches do the same. In doing so, they provide a wide range of services to help their local communities, including many that the Government and the public sector are not willing to deliver.

In addition to the traditional services that are provided by Churches such as marriage or funeral preparation, most Churches allow people to use their facilities for community activities such as fitness, sports and exercise and cultural activities such as choirs. Many Churches are also heavily involved in providing educational services for young people in the form of kids, homework and youth clubs, and they also do a great job in getting volunteers together for a wide variety of community activities; there are just too many examples to mention.

All those activities bring great economic benefits. The 'Faith in Wales: Counting for Communities' report estimates that such activity creates a total economic value in Wales of £102 million each year. If that was to be widened to include the entire United Kingdom, we could be talking about £2 billion each year. Those organisations are self-financing and create massive

economic benefits. I support the call for a study to examine in detail the contribution that those organisations make here. Such a report would increase our understanding of the role that the Churches and faith-based groups play and would increase co-operation between the groups, the Government and other bodies that are working to improve the quality of life of all our people.

Regardless of whether that study is undertaken, the good work of those groups will continue. We should commend them for that work and be grateful for the contribution that they make to our community. I support the motion.

Ms Lo: I also support the motion. Many Churches and faith-based groups in Northern Ireland benefit not only members of the faith communities but our wider society as they address social issues.

We are well known for our generosity in helping people in developing countries, and a number of our Churches and faith-based groups regularly raise funds for relief work overseas. At home, the Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS) has told me that faith-based organisations have been the main source of support for the destitute in our community and that, without the generosity of those organisations, it would be facing a much more serious crisis than it is currently dealing with.

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

Those organisations have also been proactive in opening their doors to refugees and other migrant groups and in providing them with opportunities to meet others and seek advice. They have also made their premises available for groups to use. Indeed, the City Church in south Belfast and the interfaith organisation Embrace Northern Ireland were very active in helping the Roma families when they were targeted by racists in June 2009.

The 'Faith in Wales: Counting for Communities' report highlighted the contributions that were made by the faith-based sector in Wales, with some 42,000 volunteers generating a total economic value of more than £100 million. That research covered a range of faiths, including Baha'i, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish and Sikh, and, if we are to conduct a similar study here, it is important that we also include minority faiths and the interfaith groups, which promote a shared future.

Minister Ritchie and the voluntary community unit of DSD held a series of consultations with interfaith groups a couple of years ago, and papers from NICEM and the Northern Ireland Inter Faith Forum were presented at a DSD conference. However, as yet, nothing concrete has emerged from that exercise, and perhaps the Minister will update the House on that.

4.00 pm

Government lines of responsibility on faith issues are often unclear. DSD accepts responsibility when there is a social development component, but it refers issues of equality or good relations to OFMDFM. Sometimes DCAL also gets involved. If there is to be a study, all three Departments need to be actively involved, and some joined-up approach linking up with the good work of the sector of faith-based organisations and Churches is needed.

I understand that DSD is commissioning the Churches' Community Work Alliance (CCWA) to establish a faith forum. According to the Inter-Faith Forum, the proposed faith forum will include some members from minority faith communities, but people from minority faiths are barred from holding membership of the CCWA and have not been involved in discussing the proposals. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that.

Both the recent DSD consultation on volunteering and a Volunteer Development Agency report published in 2007 showed a significant decline in faith-based volunteering since 1995. However, it still remains a large sector, involving volunteers in activities for youth and children's work, befriending, luncheon clubs, transport, and so on. It is a very valuable sector. The consultation paper proposed that the sector needs to build volunteer management skills in order to increase volunteer recruitment and retention. I hope that the Volunteer Development Agency can help that sector to strengthen its volunteering infrastructure.

Although many faith-based organisations are self-financing, it is important that they are on a good financial footing. I hope that, through the study, a range of Departments and other bodies, such as DSD, OFMDFM, the Community Relations Council and local councils —

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

Ms Lo: — can jointly help to give them better financial assistance.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that all electronic devices should be switched off.

Mr Storey: I obviously support the motion, given that I am one of the signatories to it. Over the long years of the terrorist campaign that we unfortunately endured in Northern Ireland, there was a very positive contribution that helped to keep our society intact and also helped to ensure that those terrorist organisations did not succeed in luring into their grasp those young people whom they saw as being useful in their very evil activities. I have no doubt that many of the faith organisations that have been referred to have made an invaluable contribution to ensuring that that was the case.

Sometimes when we debate an issue such as this, or other issues, in the House, we do not give the place to those organisations that have made an invaluable contribution to our communities. Other Members have made that point and have given specific references. I welcome the positive attitude that has been displayed by, for example, the Minister of Finance and Personnel to dormant bank accounts. He is considering ways in which that money might be made available to faith-based organisations.

On grounds of conscience, many faith-based organisations find themselves unable to apply for, for example, lottery funding. That is an entirely honourable and praiseworthy position, and Members who may feel that they would have no difficulty with that need to try to understand the challenges that that brings to some faith-based organisations. It, therefore, needs to be reflected on and seriously considered. It is unfortunate that so many good initiatives are stretched almost to breaking point because, to date, mechanisms have not been found to enable such groups and schemes to access funding and assistance.

I note Ms Lo's comments about the CCWA. Common among certain faith-based organisations is the feeling that they are often out of the loop of what are always deemed to be the four main religious denominations or large Churches in Northern Ireland. That issue must be addressed seriously. Therefore, I welcome the assistance that the Finance Minister could derive from dormant bank accounts, and most, if not all, Members will welcome that.

Although it is in the Minister of Finance and Personnel's remit to derive such funds, today's debate is for the Minister for Social Development to respond to. We wait to hear what she has to say about the issue. It will be particularly interesting to hear her comments on the proposals in the report 'Join In, Get Involved: Build a Better Future', which DSD commissioned recently. Proposal 26 of that report refers to faith-based organisations and the faith-based sector. It states:

"To ensure volunteering in this sector remains vibrant there is a need to enhance linkages between the faith based sector and the volunteering infrastructure in order to provide better support and information in relation to the involvement of volunteers."

My colleague Michelle McIlveen adequately described the report that was published in Wales, and she and other Members referred to the fact that an audit was carried out. An audit and an analysis are needed to identify clearly the organisations that come from a faith-based community but that feel that they are very much outside the loop at the moment. Indeed, another Member referred to the need for such analysis. We wait to hear what the Minister has to say, and I support the motion.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. Tá mé ag tabhairt tacaíochta don rún atá á chaibidil againn inniu.

I will use my speaking time to highlight and pay tribute to the work of the Society of St Vincent de Paul. I am not sure whether that body is defined exactly as a faith-based organisation, but I know that it was founded in 1833 by a group of Catholic students and that its aim is to put faith into action through direct contact with and assistance to the poor and needy. It has hundreds of active branches, or conferences, all over Ireland, over 180 of which are in the North alone. In 2008, St Vincent de Paul spent £3.4 million in the North alone in very practical ways on the needy and poor. That took the form of assistance with cash, food, clothing, fuel, debt relief and practical basic help, such as providing a cooker or a washing machine for a family or an individual in need.

I am aware of the work of St Vincent de Paul in the parish of Termonmaguirk, which includes Carrickmore, in my constituency of West Tyrone. I am also aware of an active conference in Omagh, where there is an excellent shop in Castle Street that takes and sells donations of clothing. This is quite a sensitive issue, but I am told that St Vincent de Paul in Omagh and other areas has presided over and paid for the repatriation of people from other countries who have come to live and work here and who have died here without a family network. St Vincent de Paul has noticed a gap in government provision in such cases, and it has often stepped into that breach.

That poses the question: is such a matter more properly within the remit of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, or is it an NIO or Health Department concern? Government should attempt to get to grips with the particular situation in which someone, who has come here from another country to live and work, dies without a family network and the body is to be sent back home. Perhaps the Government need to step in to assist organisations such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul to deal with that matter.

In my area, St Vincent de Paul works closely with organisations such as Omagh Independent Advice Services and statutory bodies not only to provide immediate help or relief but to try to empower people and to make them more self-sufficient, and I welcome that. It is my understanding that the society, like many other organisations, provides that type of help in a non-judgemental spirit of compassion based on the need of the family or the individual. Very often, the work of those organisations is preventing admissions to hospitals, and if that is the case, they are doing the work that Departments are statutorily obliged to carry out. That being the case, government can do a lot more to meet the likes of the Society of St Vincent de Paul half way.

Mr Newton: I thank the Members who tabled the motion for debate. I want to concentrate on the area of youth provision, which is a small part of the overall motion. I also want to take a bit of licence because the

motion describes organisations that are faith based, but there are those outside the faith-based aspect that I believe make a very positive contribution to the well-being of the youth of Northern Ireland in particular. I am thinking of organisations within the scouting movement, which may not be associated with any particular church, though many of them are. I ask that consideration be given to the fact that organisations of that type — the Boys' Brigade, the Girl Guides — are generally described as uniformed organisations rather than faith-based organisations.

I want to pay tribute to the many people who volunteer in the uniformed organisations from week to week, month to month, year to year and give generously of their time in developing the youth of this country. Where those organisations are active, they have contributed significantly to the character building of our young people, placing with them real values that will stand the test of time in society, assisting them with the development of skills and, indeed, in many ways, simply making them into very rounded young people who will often play leadership roles in society in their later lives.

In my constituency, I have seen the value of such groups, particularly in the inner city areas. My colleague Mr Storey referred to the time of bombings, murders, and so on, when terrorism was at its height, yet those organisations continued to meet, often in very difficult circumstances. Indeed, many would be regarded as the salt or preservative of the communities in which they were operating, regardless of whether that community was in the inner city or based in a large housing estate.

I was approached by a faith-based group, Mount-pottinger Baptist Church, and was privileged to sponsor the fiftieth anniversary of its Boys' Brigade movement, an event that took place in Parliament Buildings. On that anniversary, many people travelled across the globe to pay tribute to one man in particular and to the organisation through which they received their training. Many people at that meeting, some of whom are leading businessmen today, said that had it not been for Boys Brigade meetings on Tuesday or Thursday nights, they could quite easily have drifted into other organisations. That tells me of the real value of such groups and uniformed organisations.

4.15 pm

In my humble opinion, those organisations do not receive enough recognition from government. Indeed, I met with representatives of all those groups quite recently, and I understand that the amount of money that they receive centrally from government is minimal — it works out at less than 50p a head. Indeed, central organisations get minimal funding, and the groups themselves get between £100 and £200 a year from government or council sources.

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

Mr Newton: In supporting the motion, I ask that some attention be given to uniformed organisations so that a higher value is placed on them than has been in the past.

Mrs M Bradley: Our recognition today of faith-based organisations reminds of what my former party leader John Hume did when he was made Nobel Laureate. The first thing that he did when he came home with the money that he received was to make large contributions to the Society of St Vincent de Paul and, indeed, to the Salvation Army. John was recognising faith-based organisations then, and we are doing the same here today. I welcome the motion, and I thank the Members who tabled it.

For many years, faith-based organisations have been making significant and valuable contributions to our society. Faith-based organisations are the second largest contributors to volunteering. I have worked with St Vincent de Paul, which is a well-known faith-based group, and I know that it targets people who need assistance and help with practical or financial matters. The organisation made a great difference to the many families that it helped, and even today, it still has a high profile. Given the current economic times, I am aware that it is busier than ever.

In my constituency, St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army are two of the most charitable faith-based organisations at the forefront of such work, and they both play an active role in our communities. I have a lasting memory of a family who approached the Salvation Army for help in searching for their brother, whom they had lost contact with after he had gone to England 30-odd years previously. The organisation enlisted the help of all its branches around England, and as a result, the family was reunited just in time, as the brother had recently received a diagnosis of a terminal illness. The financial implications of such a nationwide search would have been astronomical, and the family could never have afforded it. The value of reuniting them was, therefore, priceless.

The Welsh Assembly's 'Faith in Wales: Counting for Communities' report puts the economic contribution of faith-based volunteering at approximately £102 million. Indeed, my colleague Dr McDonnell raised the issue of the contribution of faith-based groups during Northern Ireland Question Time at Westminster on 3 June 2009, and Paul Goggins and our Finance Minister were in agreement about the major impact that such groups have on our many multi-denominational communities. Given that our communities are submerged in economic and political disarray, it is vital that that good work continues and that it is encouraged to develop.

I appreciate that the Department for Social Development is endeavouring to do just that, and I have every confidence that our Minister will do everything that she can to bring the volunteering ethos, particularly that delivered from faith-based organisations, to its optimum capacity.

I support the motion, and I thank Michelle McIlveen, Simon Hamilton, and — who else tabled the motion?

A Member: Mervyn.

Mrs M Bradley: How could I forget Mervyn? *[Laughter.]* I thank them for bringing the issue to the House. I hope that we all continue to support faith groups. I could have mentioned many more church groups, but they have been mentioned already.

Mr G Robinson: There are a vast number of unsung heroes in Northern Ireland who give up their time to help those in our society who need support of various types. Such people are rarely acknowledged. However, the practical contribution that they make to the lives of many is immense. I pay tribute to those people and to the work that they do.

Volunteers come from all faiths in society and raise the quality of life for many people. From practical experience, and from the 'Faith in Wales' report, I know that volunteers' contributions can include supporting a family during a time of illness or bereavement; visiting older people; organising social activities, which help to keep local communities together; and providing youth club services and facilities. Those are very important parts of community identity and help to reduce social exclusion.

How much of this work is being done in Northern Ireland? Are the skills and talents of the voluntary sector being fully used? Nobody knows. The only way that we can accurately assess the true situation is by following the example set by the Welsh Assembly and commissioning a study to find answers. When the situation in Northern Ireland is accurately known, the different Departments can use the skills that already exist in communities to help — and I stress "help" — to deliver some of their responsibilities at a fraction of the cost. That will mean that local people deal with their own communities, and that services are delivered to otherwise hard-to-reach areas. It will ensure that individuals and families are assured maximum support, whatever type of support they need.

I hope that all Members see the motion as a practical way of finding the talent available in Northern Ireland and ensuring that it is put to the best use for the people of Northern Ireland on the most local of levels. I support the motion.

Mr Bell: I support the motion, which was so well proposed by my colleague. I declare an interest as a youth worker at Newtownards Congregational Church.

I do not underestimate the task that the Minister has in trying to quantify the work that churches have contributed to. Across the Strangford constituency, many churches have placed the community at the heart of the work that they do.

A number of weeks ago, when I never thought that I would be standing here, it was my privilege to distribute Christmas gifts that had been provided to social services by St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army. Many homes to which we delivered presents had been wrecked by domestic violence, by unemployment or by mortgages that could not be paid. Some people had lost their homes and moved into Housing Executive accommodation, and had no support for Christmas. Along came the Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul to provide those children with gifts. That was done quietly and unassumingly. The people who contribute to the Salvation Army and to St Vincent de Paul will never know the impact that those gifts have or the joy that they bring. I had the privilege to see parents — many of them single mothers — receive those gifts, knowing that they can provide their children with gifts in what are very difficult circumstances.

In my constituency of Strangford, people can go to the Kiltonga Store House to get a Christian response and food. That is given, free of charge, to people who are genuinely in need and who, in many cases through no fault of their own, find themselves in situations of deep distress.

Last night, Alderman Shannon and I saw the difficulties that there are in the Ards area due to alcohol abuse. The Central ward in Newtownards has the highest rate of referrals for alcohol abuse and addiction of any eastern area, with Portavogie coming in seventh among those wards. In response to that, a member of my constituency staff goes out on Friday nights, with a collective made up of the local Churches, and parks a caravan in the middle of the town square in Newtownards to offer support and advice to those in need, and, in particular, to those in need due to the effects of excess alcohol.

I note the work that Diane Holt has done with her team of volunteers at The Link project, which gets down to the very basics. I visited the project's facilities, which housed a basic shower for people who had lost much of their self-esteem, had no personal hygiene and could not afford basic toiletries. Those people could go to The Link project to get help, support and a shower.

In my own Newtownards Congregational Church, there is the Boys' Brigade, the Girls' Brigade, the holiday Bible club, the Child Evangelism Fellowship Good News club, the Saturday night youth club and the Cross Factor. Often, those programmes, which offer support to young people and elderly people, are provided by people who have already done a day's work. Those people have come home tired yet have

gone out to give of themselves in the service of others. Staggeringly, many of those people are retired and, in many cases, should have been putting on a fire and relaxing for the evening. Instead, they have decided to give of themselves in the service of others.

We need to support the work of the Churches and the work of individuals, for example, through volunteering. In many cases, very complex vetting systems are in place to guarantee child protection, and rightly so, and Church volunteers are helping by administering those systems.

It will be difficult to quantify the work that has been done, but quantify it we should. We should pay tribute to the people responsible, even though they do not want great glory for what they have done. They do what they do out of service to others. I thank all the people throughout Strangford who have followed the example of the Lord Jesus Christ and, quite literally, lived their lives in the service of others.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. Many moons ago, I marched with my head held high, my feet six inches off the ground and my eyes staring forward, transfixed. I was not a young Orangeman at the time, although I am now an Orangeman, nor was I a member of the Territorial Army at the time, although I served in it for more than 14 years. I was a member of the Boys' Brigade (BB). I was one of those young boys who, at a very early stage, felt proud to be a member of that organisation. I was just one of thousands of children who benefited from that Christian group.

Launched in Glasgow in October 1883, the Boys' Brigade has been in operation for more than 125 years. To celebrate that achievement, Ards Borough Council organised an event last year, to which many people were invited to remember and reminisce about what the Boys' Brigade has done in our area.

As an organisation, the Boys' Brigade does not simply train a child in the Bible, although that is an honourable purpose in itself, but trains children to be active and helpful members of society through its badge schemes, which encourage work in the community. Members are rewarded for helping neighbours, visiting the elderly and minding children. All those may seem small things, but they are big things when it comes to building character, personality and compassion for others.

A phrase that I keep close to me is, "Compassion is your pain in my heart." Thinking about that focuses one's attention on others who need help. The activities that children do in the Boys' Brigade are small measures that encourage them to be part of the community and not simply observers. That is important, because today's children will be looking after the community in the future.

The Boys' Brigade also encourages hobbies and fosters talents through its regional and national competitions

in sports and academia. Being part of the Boys' Brigade is not all serious; it is fun as well. It builds character and personality. My three boys attended the Boys' Brigade at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Greyabbey and excelled. They built their personalities, built their characters and made lasting friendships. They achieved their badges, such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and the Queen's Badge, and they did so because they wanted to, not because their mum and dad pushed them. They do better at something if they want to do it, rather than if I tell them to do it, which would not be the right way in any case.

Boys, and girls through the Girls' Brigade, spend time with people who care about them and want to build a relationship with them while ensuring that God remains central. It is important to build character and personality and to focus attention on the things that matter, and the best lesson to teach our children is to put God and others first.

4.30 pm

Such organisations encourage fund-raising. On many occasions, my boys have returned home with details of fund-raising events that they are doing together with the rest of the organisation. They did not only ask their families for donations but went to other houses to ask people. I know that the BB in Greyabbey and further afield has been particularly involved with cancer charities.

The BB is not the only faith-based group that helps communities. Many churches, including my own Baptist Church, send a bus through housing estates in towns to collect children for events such as Sunday school. Most of us remember being children in Sunday school. Churches and youth clubs are safe places for children, where they can meet friends and feel like everyone is loved and important and that everyone matters. That can only be good for young people.

However, faith-based groups are not limited to dealing with youth. Many churches are involved in other aspects, such as senior citizens' clubs and so on. The Link in Newtownards works with elderly people, single parents, young people and those with addiction issues, as does the Salvation Army and the Society of St Vincent De Paul in Ards and Kircubbin. For the record, I have worked with St Vincent de Paul with people from different faiths. They do not necessarily need to be Roman Catholic; Protestants can get help as well.

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

Mr Shannon: The issue is very important. I urge everyone to support the motion, and I hope that the Minister makes some positive remarks about it.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I welcome the opportunity to debate the contribution that faith-based organisations make to

society in Northern Ireland. I thank Michelle McIlveen, Simon Hamilton and Mervyn Storey for tabling this very important motion.

The motion seeks to recognise the range of services that are provided by church- and faith-based organisations. In that respect, I have no hesitation in confirming my belief that churches and faith-based groups play a significant and important role in meeting the needs of people in all our most needy and hard-to-reach communities.

Denominational, interdenominational and non-denominational faith groups have always been at the forefront of caring for local people in Belfast and throughout Northern Ireland. It is interesting to note that, in the past, before the foundation of our present health and social welfare systems in the 1940s, churches were the cornerstone of charitable work and caring for people, families and children. For example, Bryson House, which is one of our biggest local charities, owes its creation to men and women of the Christian faith who cared about the poor people in their midst.

Today, faith-based groups such as the St Vincent de Paul Society and the Salvation Army are possibly the best-known and highest-profile groups that provide services to the most in need. Year after year, their joint Christmas appeal is extremely successful in attracting support from many local companies and organisations and in collecting substantial donations of money and toys from kind-hearted people across the community. Jonathan Bell made reference to that. However, they do not do good work at Christmas alone; they make an all-year commitment to caring for people who are most in need.

Many other faith-based groups work in our midst; and there are too many to name during today's debate. Some are large and serve across all the North of Ireland while others are much smaller and focus, serve and engage with individuals and small groups of local people. All those faith groups draw volunteers from their own membership and are each making a valuable contribution to their local community in helping to serve those who are most in need. I cannot think of any area of need to which a faith-based group somewhere does not make a valued contribution.

Faith organisations serve those who are struggling with poverty, personal debt, homelessness, poor health — including addiction and drug and alcohol abuse — suicide and mental illness. They also help children and adults with learning difficulties, and deal with family breakdown, violence in the home and the neglect of children.

A research-based report commissioned by Youthnet in 2006 presented statistics that suggested that more than two thirds of all organised youth work in Northern Ireland was credited to churches and faith groups. In

recognising the extent and wide range of deprivation and social need that the faith-based organisations work to alleviate, I want to record my appreciation for the huge contribution to improving quality of life that churches and faith-based groups make in our society. Faith-based groups make a massive contribution in Northern Ireland, probably more so than anywhere else in Great Britain or in Ireland generally. I also believe that it is widely accepted across all our churches that faith-based groups can do more and wish to do even more.

A few years ago, an interdepartmental task force reported that, as part of its work of looking into hard-to-reach communities, the Churches had, in some cases, withdrawn from serving the needs of local communities as a result of inter- and intra-community tensions associated with our most troubled history. That situation was mentioned earlier by Mervyn Storey. Indeed, many of our Church leaders provided the evidence to support that view and led a call from within the Churches to look for new ways of engagement with those who needed help but were not actively involved in any particular church community.

Mr Shannon: Is the Minister aware that, sometimes, the Churches endeavour to address those issues collectively? For example, the church groups in Newtownards and Comber have, in an intergenerational way, tried to address issues and identify the help that is needed in those towns.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mr Shannon for his comment. He has given a good example of what happens not just in his constituency of Strangford but across Northern Ireland. It is encouraging to hear more and more reports of Church leaders encouraging their members to reach out with compassion and to speak a message of love — a model of practical service to those who are most in need — rather than sit comfortably in warm, well-maintained church buildings, looking after the needs of their own members.

As the drive for faith-based work in the community has gathered momentum, I have been pleased to provide financial support to the Churches Community Work Alliance (CCWA) Northern Ireland, which is a regional infrastructure body that is tasked with increasing the work of faith-based groups that seek to serve disadvantaged people. The CCWA funding contract sets challenging targets for expanding, developing and improving the effect that local faith groups can have on their community. I am satisfied that they are developing that work well in a growing number of churches across many denominational and independent groups. As an organisation, the CCWA is modelling the benefits and advantages of collaboration when independent and interdenominational groups come together to serve and to share resources and expertise, thus maximising their potential to make a difference.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister for Social Development: I must go on; I apologise, but I have little time.

Another example of DSD's work with local Churches is the "Don't miss out" campaign, which was launched by the Social Security Agency in November 2009. The campaign was designed to provide information on benefit uptake to those aged over 65. All four main denominational Churches in four council areas provided posters and leaflets to members and visitors attending church services and programmed activities for elderly people. As part of our efforts to increase benefit uptake among elderly people, the agency will review the success of that campaign and the contribution made by the Churches. Again, the willingness of the four main denominational Churches in assisting the agency in that campaign is further testimony to their desire to partner with statutory authorities to help the needy.

If I had more time, I could inform Members about the involvement of the Church of Ireland diocese of Derry and Raphoe in an interesting pilot project to increase the number of faith-based volunteers working with disadvantaged individuals in their local community. Similarly, I was pleased to secure funding to help to initiate a small pilot project at the City Church in Belfast. The project recruits volunteers from local faith communities to address problems associated with migrant worker families, as well as other community problems, in the area of south Belfast in which the City Church is based. Both projects are excellent examples of faith-led initiatives that demonstrate the caring heart of a faith community towards the poor and needy, the disadvantaged and the excluded.

The debate provides me with the opportunity to advise the House of another new initiative, which, after extensive negotiations and discussions, will soon be announced publicly. I am currently agreeing and finalising proposals to establish a two-year pilot faith forum for social development. The forum will draw its members from churches and faith groups across Northern Ireland that have demonstrated a sustained commitment to serving those in need in our community, regardless of their individual faith, religion or creed.

Officials in the Department's voluntary and community unit will meet with the forum quarterly to discuss relevant policy areas. At those meetings, the officials will also hear suggestions from faith-based organisations on how my Department can better partner with faith groups in harnessing and unlocking their potential to reach and help the people and communities in greatest need.

I expect that most Members recognise the biblical basis for the involvement of the Christian Church in social action through stories such as the Good Samaritan, which promotes the importance of being a good and caring neighbour, calls for widows and orphans to be

looked after and upholds the principle of feeding the hungry and caring for the poor. I wonder how many Members are aware that that principle of charitable giving and demonstrating consideration for others less fortunate is shared by all major world faiths. For that reason, it is important to ensure that a small number of places on the new pilot faith forum are allocated to members who are able to represent and advise on the contribution that can be made by our minority non-Christian faith communities.

Northern Ireland is a growing, multicultural society with an increasing size and range of faith communities. I am confident that Members will recognise the value of involving such representatives at the outset of the initiative. Although the creation of interfaith respect and mutual understanding will not be the primary objectives of such a faith forum, I am confident that those are highly likely to be most welcome spin-offs from its work.

The motion also calls on me to commission a study similar to the Welsh Assembly's report 'Faith in Wales: Counting for Communities'. In recognition of the comments that I and others have made during the wider debate and given the immeasurable contribution made by faith communities to society here in Northern Ireland, I remain unconvinced about the long-term benefits of spending scarce financial resources on such a report.

However, I do want to be helpful, and I am interested in consulting the future members of the faith forum on that matter. I propose to allocate a small annual budget to the pilot faith forum for the express purpose of carrying out research that will help the forum to be better placed to advise on and influence policy matters and project initiatives proposed by my Department.

Several possible research proposals are currently under consideration. I will welcome more detailed proposals from the faith forum once it has had a chance to find its feet and deliberate on its priorities for research projects.

4.45 pm

Many issues have been raised during the debate. I believe that members of all faith groups have demonstrated their commitment to the needy; not because they want recognition, but because it is a fundamental element of their personal faith. It is an expression of their beliefs and values, and that is something that is central and pivotal to each of us. It is appropriate for the Assembly and its Members to recognise the contribution and capacity of all those faith-based organisations and all who carry out such work in partnership with statutory authorities in order to make a difference in local communities across Northern Ireland.

I am pleased that the House has recognised the significant and valuable role that is played by faith-based organisations in our society. I assure Members that my intention is to continue to work with faith-based organisations to further unlock and increase their potential to work as partners with all statutory bodies and agencies for the good of all our people, especially those in most need.

I will respond to Members on individual matters if I have not addressed them in the body of my speech. I am happy to have further discussions with Members on this important topic.

Mr Hamilton: The debate has been valuable, and I welcome the constructive input from Members on all sides. I thank the Minister for her response to the motion, which was very positive.

It does not matter whether one is a person of faith or not; it would be difficult to listen to even part of the debate without acknowledging the positive impact that faith-based organisations make across Northern Ireland. That work is done by people who sometimes feel vilified because of their faith and who rarely have the good work that they selflessly carry out recognised at all.

I note the positive and constructive comments that the Minister made about the creation of a faith forum. That has great potential. I welcome the fact that she will provide a small amount of funding to that forum to try to get a sense of the impact that the sector has on society in Northern Ireland, so that, rather than simply existing, the forum can do useful work.

The main thrust of the motion is based on the 'Faith in Wales: Counting for Communities' report. That report is an important recognition of the work that is done by faith-based communities. The faith-based sector has an immeasurable impact, as the Minister said, but the report tries to quantify the impact that those organisations have. The existence of the report in itself is an important recognition of that.

I was staggered to learn from the report that the economic impact, which is not something that one would necessarily associate with faith-based organisations, is around £102 million a year in Wales. Even on a crude, pro rata basis, that would translate to over £50 million in Northern Ireland. The figure would probably be much higher than that, given the propensity of faith-based organisations here. The monetary impact is huge.

Every Member who spoke mentioned the impact of faith-based organisations in their area. I am no different, and my constituency colleagues have saved me time by speaking about some of those organisations. We can all think of the work that is done in our respective areas with people such as pensioners and foreign nationals by churches, church groups and groups that, although not associated with churches now, owe their origins to churches. As Mr Shannon mentioned, our

constituency provides very good examples of churches working together to tackle problems. An inter-church forum works, for example, to help better integrate foreign nationals into our community.

Every Member could catalogue countless examples of such work in his or her constituency, and it is valuable that some have done that in today's debate. As Members explained the positive work that they had witnessed being done in their constituencies, I noted the sheer breadth of the services that faith-based organisations provide. I am a member of the Assembly all-party group on international development, and we regularly receive briefings from faith-based organisations that do fantastic work abroad and provide international aid to people in real poverty in developing countries all around the globe.

Members spoke of churches' and faith-based organisations' fantastic youth provision. Rather than just being organisations for the sake of it, those groups develop the skills of our young people. They help to encourage leisure, recreation, sport and outdoor activity and thereby tackle health problems. One of the best examples of that is Boys' Brigade football, which is a fantastic organisation that has spawned old boys' leagues in the Belfast area. Indeed, the talent of Northern Ireland captain, Aaron Hughes, was first spotted when he was playing BB football. Therefore, faith-based organisations can also help on the cultural and sporting side.

We heard about the accommodation that churches provide for their communities, often at a reduced rate. Indeed, they often provide accommodation to non-faith based organisations to give them a base from which to carry out good work in the community. We heard about the positive work that many churches and faith-based groups do in providing childcare, which, as the Minister knows, has an interface with social security work. A lot of churches and church groups provide childcare facilities on their premises; that childcare is much needed in Northern Ireland, especially in rural communities.

Other not-so-obvious examples of the positive contribution that faith-based organisations make include the preservation of listed buildings, which has a positive impact on tourism, and choirs that are based in churches. Indeed, you, Mr Deputy Speaker, are involved with a drama group that is associated with a church. That is not an obvious example of the work in which one might expect a church or faith-based organisation to be involved, but it enriches the cultural vibrancy of our society. There are many examples of the good work that is being done.

For me, the best and most important contribution of faith-based organisations is the work that they do with the vulnerable, whether they are older people, those with an alcohol or drug dependency or whoever.

Faith-based organisations often work with people whom the system has failed or cannot reach. A lot of Members cited organisations such as the Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul. Indeed, I intend to visit the Salvation Army in the next number of weeks to see the work that it does with homeless people in Northern Ireland.

By and large, people do not speak or hear about that work, but, if it was not done, it would be up to Departments, such as that of the Minister and the Health Minister, to take up the slack and provide the services. It is important to quantify the impact of those organisations, because they do work on behalf of vulnerable people in society that the Government would otherwise be responsible for.

Social economy enterprises also do great work. Some of Northern Ireland's biggest social economy enterprises, such as the East Belfast Mission, which Michelle McIlveen mentioned, are huge entities in their local, and often very disadvantaged, communities. Those organisations provide jobs for people, often the long-term unemployed. As is the case with many other faith-based organisations, lottery grants, which are a huge source of funding, are denied to them because they make a conscious decision, based on conscience, not to apply for them.

That is why there is a lot of support for using money from the dormant accounts scheme to support faith-based organisations in that work. It was significant that the highest number of respondents to the consultation on dormant accounts came from faith-based organisations.

We must also recognise, as most Members have done, that a lot of the work performed by faith-based organisations is not paid but is done on a voluntary basis. In that respect, it dovetails with the development of the Minister's volunteering strategy. The consultation on a volunteering strategy for Northern Ireland recognised the work that the faith-based sector does. It noted that, as with many volunteering organisations, the number of those involved in faith-based organisations is diminishing. Any strategy that is developed must do what it can to identify the needs of the sector and ensure that there will be volunteers in future to deliver services.

Members will all want to pay tribute to those who give their time, energy and skills, free of charge and without a second thought, to help the vulnerable in society. We all acknowledge that. In my constituency work, I am always impressed — I know that other Members are similarly impressed — by the impact that the faith-based sector has on Northern Ireland society. As the Minister said, that work is carried out without seeking recognition. However, we would be failing in our duty if we did not take this occasion to recognise

the valuable, immeasurable contribution that Churches and faith-based organisations make to society. We value them greatly. We acknowledge their work and are grateful for it. We want to encourage them to continue that work and do what we can, as an Assembly and an Executive, to encourage and sustain it.

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

Mr Hamilton: Even though many in the faith-based sector are derided as marginal, we have learnt from this debate that they are very much mainstream. I welcome the Minister's comments, and we must maximise the impact that they have on society.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the range of services provided by Churches and faith-based groups in Northern Ireland, particularly in traditionally hard-to-reach communities; notes the findings of the 'Faith in Wales: Counting for Communities' report; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to commission a similar study to quantify the contribution made by these organisations across Northern Ireland.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker.]

ADJOURNMENT

Easibus Service: Bangor

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes; all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately six minutes.

Mr Easton: I thank the Business Committee for allowing this Adjournment debate. I hope that Members will echo what I say today and send a clear message to the Minister for Regional Development that we are most unhappy with the decision to withdraw the Easibus service from Bangor.

I welcome the opportunity to raise this issue as it is of great concern to my constituents. The Department for Regional Development (DRD) and Translink have recently decided to withdraw the valued Easibus service in my constituency. Public reaction in the north Down area and particularly in Bangor, especially from the elderly and disabled, is one of confusion, anger, betrayal and loneliness. That community's confidence has been bashed as a result of the withdrawal of the service.

I am astonished that DRD and Translink have decided to abandon the most vulnerable in our society: the pensioners and disabled. The Department has made a huge error, and I hope the Minister will right the wrong that has been done to the elderly and disabled in the north Down area.

The Easibus service has been running since 2000. It provides transport for the elderly and disabled. The service is valuable in getting people from A to B, and it provides easy access; a specialist driver is trained to help passengers get on and off the bus. The buses are designed with the needs of elderly and disabled people in mind. The buses take many people from their homes, often from streets that are not accessible to normal buses, to their shopping destinations. Many people are extremely grateful for this service. The service has been successful since its introduction, but it is to be withdrawn completely during 2010.

5.00 pm

Mr Bell: I thank Mr Easton for giving way. Does he agree that the withdrawal of the Easibus service will effectively leave stranded those who are visually impaired and many out there who are single or widowed and may have lost a loved one who was the only driver in the house?

Mr Easton: I thank my colleague for that interjection. I have received many calls from the elderly, some of whom are blind and do not know how they will get out of their house to go to the shops with their guide dog. They feel extremely vulnerable and frightened. My colleague's comments echo the concerns of poor pensioners and disabled people.

As a result of the withdrawal of the service, I fear that many of my constituents will become housebound. In order to go about their business, they will be forced to hire taxis or use the door-to-door alternative, which cannot cope with an extra 23,000 passengers. The resources are not available to cope with that number of extra passengers. It is well known that it is important for older people to get out because it helps them with their mobility. It is also good for one's mental health.

Statistics provided by the Department for Regional Development show that, in the financial year 2008-09, the Easibus service was used by 23,000 passengers. I asked an Assembly question that confirms that. The Department and Translink, however, deem that inadequate and argue that the service is underused. More than 20% of people in my constituency are over 60. North Down has the oldest population of any constituency in Northern Ireland, and that figure is increasing. The Department and Translink are letting down those people. The service has been in existence for 10 years. If it has not been successful, why has it been in operation for so long?

Will the Minister tell us why there was no public consultation? Why were the people of Bangor, the council or we politicians not consulted about the service being withdrawn? We note the accessible transport strategy, the aim of which was to:

“have an accessible transport system that enables older people and people with disabilities to participate more fully in society, enjoy greater independence and experience a better quality of life.”

Will the Minister explain the apparent contradiction between the accessible transport strategy action plan for 2009-2012 and the withdrawal of the Easibus service? I do not understand it.

Perhaps the Minister will prevent the Easibus service from being withdrawn and look at alternatives. Some alternatives have been suggested to me by Translink drivers, such as taking out 16 slots of ordinary services that are operated elsewhere in North Down and filling them with the 16 journeys that are made each day by the Easibus service. That means that no one will suffer, and it would pay for the Easibus service to be retained. Perhaps we could look at meetings with the council. In co-operation with the Department for Regional Development and Translink, perhaps Bloomfield shopping centre will provide funding to keep the service going.

Will the Minister reassure us that he will take steps to try to reverse this absolutely disgraceful decision, which is not warranted, not needed and is a disaster for my constituency? The Minister's party is very much into preaching about equality and people having the right to do what they want in life without fear of persecution or having their rights taken away. If the Minister withdraws the Easibus service, he will do away with equality for pensioners and the disabled. I plead with the Minister to take strong action, show that he can take responsibility and give equality back to the pensioners and the disabled in North Down.

Mr Cree: I concur with my North Down colleague Mr Easton. The Easibus service has been a useful tool for people with disability in North Down. It was launched in 2000 amid a great fanfare of publicity. It was to be:

"customer friendly but infrequent, being primarily designed to encourage elderly people to get out more."

DRD said that Easibus was:

"a flexible service often suited to those on a low income",

and that it would promote social inclusion of people with disabilities.

Over the years since then, there have been other papers, to which I am sure the Minister will refer. The equality impact assessment on the 'Transport Programme for People with Disabilities', which was published in September 2004, reported that part of the Department's project would be to:

"continue to fund Translink's Easibus services in Bangor".

The draft action plan of a more recent vintage — 2009 to 2012 — states that the Department's policy remains as it was in 2005:

"To have an accessible transport system that enables older people and people with disabilities to participate more fully in society, enjoy greater independence and experience a better quality of life."

Commercial aspects of the service were not referred to anywhere in those documents, but I am afraid that that is what we now have.

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

In the year 2006-07, Easibus cost Translink £136,900, a cost that continued until 2009. The subsidy was £37,500 in 2006-07. In 2008-09, that subsidy was £38,400, so there was a significant subsidy that has now gone. I contend that we now have commercial decision-making and that, most regrettably, the needs of disabled people have been ignored.

I urge the Minister to have a look at the issue. The numbers of people who use the service have been high: from 52,284 in 2006-07 to 42,800 in 2008-09, which is the last year for which we have figures. There is, therefore, a clearly identified need. A high proportion of North

Down's senior population deserves special recognition, particularly those with disabilities.

Dr Farry: I congratulate Alex Easton on securing the Adjournment debate, which reflects an issue of deep concern to the community in North Down. I stress that that community extends much further than those who directly use the service. It extends to their relatives and to those who care deeply for their neighbours and who want people to have the opportunities to enjoy life.

There is a very active local campaign against the withdrawal of Easibus services. I pay tribute to the sterling work and the deep commitment that is evidenced by the campaigners' attendance at the Assembly for a considerable time, which reflects their interest in ensuring that their voices are heard by policymakers at the highest level.

People's concerns are twofold. The first concern is the withdrawal of the service, which I will come to in a moment. The second concern is the nature of the consultation or, rather, the lack of consultation around the decision. It came very much out of the blue for people, who believe that Bangor was at the head of the queue for cuts that were not based on any real assessment of the community's need for the service. The Department's consultation on Translink's governance issues was effectively taken over by the community expressing its concerns, because that was the only forum that those people had to get their anti-withdrawal message across to policymakers.

Translink provides a public service, which, like any public service, is there because the market is not capable of providing it on a stand-alone basis. Society accepts that obligation and, consequently, invests money in such services. A subsidy is an inevitable part of the equation, and the issue is whether the subsidy can be justified. We believe that it can.

The issue is about giving older citizens and people with disabilities the freedom to enjoy life and to contribute to wider society. It is important that such people are able to go to the shops, access GP surgeries, pharmacies etc, participate in local community life and meet friends. They just want to get out of the house and to feel important, recognised and respected.

We talk a lot about accessibility, and I recognise that Translink has improved the level of service and the nature of the regular buses that are on offer. However, accessibility is about more than that, and the Easibus service is tailored to meet the needs of people with particular vulnerabilities. We must also recognise that accessibility is about how people get from where they live in order to access public transport. There is no point in someone having an accessible mainstream bus service if that person is unable to get to the bus stop from his or her house. To a considerable extent, Easibus

compensates for that service gap, and people welcome the fact that it is available.

It has been argued that the door-to-door service offers a viable alternative to Easibus. Since it was introduced in 2000, however, things have moved on. I welcome provision of the door-to-door service; a lot of people use and value it. However, we must recognise its limitations. First, the system works through bookings, and there is often a waiting list. Secondly, it involves pre-planning an outing. Sometimes, people's circumstances change, and they decide that they do not want to go out, or events come up at short notice to which they want to go but cannot access the door-to-door service.

There is also the cost issue. If the problems that are caused by the absence of Easibus are to be addressed by the door-to-door service, given the level of oversubscription to it, are we going to see a substantial investment in it to pick up the slack? The cost of running the door-to-door service is well in excess of that for running the Easibus service, so the proposal to remove it seems to be a false economy. The Easibus service is a much more cost-effective way of doing things, and it gives people a greater degree of freedom.

I want older citizens and persons with disabilities in my community and everywhere else to have the freedom to be spontaneous in life so that they can get up in the morning and decide that they want to go out without having to plan to do so well in advance. Services such as Easibus provide that freedom. Bearing in mind North Down's demography, the Easibus service is central to our community, and I am stunned that the axe is to fall first in Bangor. Therefore, I join colleagues in urging the Minister for Regional Development to reconsider the decision.

Mr Weir: Like other Members, I congratulate Alex Easton on securing the debate. When the proposals to adopt a phased approach to removing the Easibus service — one bus was to be removed in January, which slipped to February, and another in June — were announced, the North Down community was unified in revulsion and anger, which was manifested by a number of groups that have campaigned against the decision. In particular, I commend the Omnibus Partnership and North Down Borough Council's disabilities working group. The council united across all divides to unanimously oppose the proposals. The feelings of ordinary people throughout North Down are illustrated by a relatively hastily arranged petition, which, in a matter of days, attracted a couple of thousand signatures. Indeed, before events overtook us last week, the council had intended to send a delegation, led by the mayor, to meet the Minister for Regional Development to discuss the matter further. In addition to the reasons that have been mentioned, people are particularly disgusted because they see the proposal as an attack on vulnerable people and on those who are least able to defend themselves.

There was concern over the way that the issue was handled and the lack of consultation. There was a feeling that North Down seems to have been front-loaded, because the Easibus service for one of the buses was due to end in January, but there was a slight postponement until February. Yet, in other parts of Northern Ireland, a review was going to take place in the summer. People are questioning what the implications are not just for North Down but for further afield.

5.15 pm

Miss McIlveen: I appreciate that this is very much a Bangor-focused debate, but it is a common theme across many constituencies. Indeed, I have been very vocal about the cutting back of the town service in Comber. I note the comments that have been made and the fact that there has been a general cutting back, and there is the feeling that the axe will fall for the rest of the service. I would like the Minister to take note that the same arguments apply across the Province, and I hope that we will not be revisiting the same debate for other towns across the Province.

Mr Weir: I concur that there is a threat beyond North Down. I agree with most of what has been said, but I take slight exception to one point. Leslie Cree mentioned that the withdrawal of the service was a commercial decision. I suspect that that was part of the thinking behind it, but, if it is a commercial decision, it is an extremely flawed one.

Members have posed questions, and the responses have been that the door-to-door service can be an adequate replacement and that Easibus was set up in the days before the door-to-door service. However, let us look at the figures. Over the past three years, Easibus has transported around 74,000 passengers, and the subsidy has been around £38,000 per year. In practice, that means that the subsidy from the Department is around £1.50 per journey. I agree with my colleague Dr Farry that the door-to-door service does an excellent service in the area in which it is focused, but its figures for North Down show that, from April to November 2009, there were about 11,000 passenger journeys, which is just under half of that of Easibus. It cost £232,000, which is approximately £20 per journey. That figure is not unique to North Down. Response to questions put to the Department show that, across Northern Ireland for a similar period, approximately 100,000 people used the door-to-door service at a cost of £2.23 million, which is about £22 per journey.

Mr Cree: I am sure that the Member is aware that DRD and Translink have already stated that the number of Easibus passengers is already extremely low and that it is not an efficient service.

Mr Weir: We are told that the numbers are extremely low, yet they are more than twice the level of the door-to-door service. The subsidy for Easibus is £1.50 as opposed

to £20. How does that make commercial or economic sense? Indeed, the bulk of people who use the Easibus service are elderly or disabled and would be switching to the door-to-door service, which may be unable to cope. To change from a situation whereby a journey is subsidised by £1.50 to one that is subsidised by £20 simply does not make economic sense. That is why I believe that the decision is fundamentally flawed.

We all appreciate that there are budgetary constraints, but, if something costs only £38,000 per year, it is not going to make a major impact on the overall budget situation and to take action will ultimately cost the public purse a good deal more. A lot of people are suspicious that the door-to-door service will be unable to cope and that we will be left every year with thousands of journeys that cannot be completed.

Those are the statistics, but behind those statistics is a host of very human stories of vulnerable people whose lifeline, which might be shopping in Bloomfield for instance, will suddenly be cut off. They will be isolated in their homes, and, for the sake of such a small amount of money, I urge the Minister to have a rethink and restore the Easibus service.

I urge the Minister to come riding to the rescue; to give hope to the vulnerable, disabled and elderly people of north Down, and to indicate that that funding will be made available. I urge him to reconsider his position.

Mr McFarland: I congratulate Alex Easton on securing the debate. Back in 2000, the Bangor Easibus was a pioneering service. During the first Assembly mandate, I was Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development. The Committee supported the development of such services so that people with disabilities could travel more easily. Indeed, the Minister sat on that Committee with me.

Since that time, the Omnibus Partnership has been a leader. Members of that partnership are present in the Gallery for the debate. The partnership was at the forefront of the development of those services with Translink in north Down, and it continues to carry out training with Translink. I pay tribute to David McDonald and his committee and, indeed, to my party colleagues on North Down Borough Council, Marion Smyth and Ian Henry, who is chairperson of the council's disabilities committee.

I understand that finance is tight and that part of the reason why that has happened is the loss of financial support, which is no longer available. However, I do not understand why proper consultation was not carried out with service users or why the service has been withdrawn in advance of that consultation. Surely Translink and the Minister need to consult properly with service users and ensure that the proposed system is not introduced too quickly, before that consultation has been carried out. They must ensure that if they

introduce a new system, it does not just replace the current one but enhances it so that a better service is produced.

Surely, a door-to-door, individual service that takes people from A to B is to be welcomed. However, as Dr Farry has said, it reduces freedom because people have to book in advance. I suspect that if the service becomes more popular, people may have to book days in advance. Therefore, people's freedom to leave their houses, board a disability-friendly bus and go somewhere will be completely curtailed. My guess is that as the door-to-door service becomes more popular, it will end up overloaded, money will not be available for it, and it, too, will end up being cut back.

I call on the Minister, as have my colleagues, to keep the current service going and to consult properly so that a good and, indeed, improved service is available to users in north Down.

Mr B Wilson: I, too, congratulate Alex Easton on securing the debate and I support colleagues who have already called for the retention of the Easibus service in Bangor. The removal of the service has generated massive opposition throughout the community, as has been shown by a petition, which local people have been queuing up to sign during the past couple of weeks. The petition was organised by North Down Borough Council's disabilities committee and the Omnibus Partnership. The council is pleased by that level of support, which highlights the concern that exists in the community.

The decision to remove the Easibus service is widely regarded as unfair and discriminatory. The issue is that minimum savings will create maximum hardship. As Members have already mentioned, although savings of £38,000 are small in the overall Translink budget, the decision to remove the service will affect the most vulnerable, disabled and older people.

When DRD set up the system, it stated that its transport programme for people with disabilities aimed to target social need by improving accessibility of public transport to people with disabilities who cannot avail themselves of existing conventional services; and to complement the work of existing service providers that are involved in programmes that are designed to promote social inclusion for people with reduced mobility. The Bangor Easibus service, which was supposed to improve and complement existing services, is now being taken away.

I am also concerned that the Bangor Easibus service is being withdrawn, yet, as some Members mentioned, the Easibus services in Derry and Belfast have not been considered for withdrawal. Is that decision the tip of the iceberg, and will the Easibus services in Belfast and Derry also be reduced? People are asking why the service in Bangor is being withdrawn.

One might ask what is being lost by withdrawing the service. The buses used for the Easibus service have no steps, easy access and low floors, all of which are extremely important for many disabled people. The hail-and-ride aspect of the Easibus service must also be considered. People were permitted to hail the bus from various points on the main road without having to walk to bus stops. The buses used on the Easibus service are also wheelchair accessible, and they provide a service that delivers the user closer to his or her door. Although a growing number of people require such facilities, they are being taken away.

I do not accept the Department's argument that the service is underused. As other Members pointed out, the service has approximately 25,000 users annually. That is a significant number of people, many of whom have no alternative source of transport. The Department also argues that the town service bus covers the route, but it does not cover the entire route. In fact, there are parts of the route that the town service bus could not access. As a result, some people will not be able to access buses at all, and, unable to get into town, they will become isolated.

Many Members said that the Easibus service is supposed to be replaced by a door-to-door service. That is a good, valuable and popular service, but it could not meet the current demand on its own. How will it meet the increased demand? For that service to meet the demand would, as Dr Farry said, cost significantly more. On that basis, unless the door-to-door service was to receive massive investment, it could not replace the Easibus service. Furthermore, the door-to-door service does not have the same flexibility as the Easibus service.

Like others, I was annoyed that Translink did not carry out a consultation process, as it has a statutory duty to do. An equality impact assessment should also have been carried out. Equality issues should be considered as part of any decision to withdraw the Easibus service. The decision discriminates against those with disabilities and older people. Therefore, I join my colleagues in asking the Minister to reconsider. The decision could be reversed at minimum cost and doing so would benefit most of the vulnerable sectors of society.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Members who contributed to the debate, and I am happy to be able to offer some explanation in relation to the Easibus service in Bangor. I am aware of the value that users of the Easibus service in Bangor have attached to it and of their sense of disappointment that it is being withdrawn.

The debate is a useful opportunity for me to deal with a number of misconceptions. Some of the Members who contributed to the debate almost created an impression

that the service was being withdrawn leaving nothing in its place. Other Members, such as Brian Wilson, seemed to imply that the entire replacement for the Easibus service would be a door-to-door service, which is not the case.

Perhaps it would help to provide some additional context about the decision and the effect that it is likely to have on users of the service and the people of Bangor and north Down. In particular, it must be understood that considerable improvements have been made to transport provision in Bangor, and the withdrawal of the Easibus service must be considered in light of those improvements.

5.30 pm

Easibus is one of a number of services delivered by my Department under the transport programme for people with disabilities, which has been in existence since 1991. It has evolved considerably over the years and has developed a range of specialised transport services for disabled people involving a number of service operators.

In addition to Easibus services in Bangor, Belfast and Derry, the programme supports a number of different initiatives. Notably, it provides support to shopmobility schemes under its umbrella group, Shopmobility Northern Ireland. It provides door-to-door transport services in towns and cities throughout the North that have populations of more than 10,000 people, and it provides funding for the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee, which is the main source of independent advice to government and others on transport issues that affect the mobility of older and disabled people.

Easibus services in the North date back to 1994 when they commenced in Belfast to provide accessible local transport, and they were introduced in Bangor in 2000. Until last week, two buses in Bangor provided four Easibus services. One of those buses has been supported by my Department, which paid about 55% of its operating costs under the transport programme for people with disabilities. In recent years, the other bus has been supported by Translink out of its resources. Earlier, however, between 2001 and 2005, that bus received support from the tenants of Bloomfield Shopping Centre.

In the past financial year, the cost of providing the Easibus services in Bangor was about £137,000, to which my Department contributed £38,000. During that year, 42,000 passengers used the four services, which is a decline from the 52,000 passengers who used the services in 2006-07.

It is important to stress that Easibus services were introduced to Bangor in a different set of circumstances than those that currently exist. In recent years, Translink, which is funded by my Department, has made major

strides in the provision of new accessible buses for town services. In addition, the Ulsterbus strategic review of 2007 resulted in an extension of town bus services in Bangor. There are now seven bus services in Bangor, which deliver more than 685,000 passenger journeys on accessible buses. In addition, 330,000 passenger journeys are made to Bangor on services from Newtownards, Donaghadee, Ballywalter, the Ulster Hospital at Dundonald, and Belfast.

Another significant change has been the commencement of the door-to-door services, which were introduced in the Bangor operational area in February 2007. The door-to-door service was specifically designed to meet the needs of people who find it difficult or impossible to use conventional public transport, and it operates throughout the Bangor urban area. It provides transport and assistance from the member's home and is not restricted to fixed routes and timetables. The door-to-door service in Bangor has more than 900 members and makes, on average, 1,500 journeys a month.

With regard to the withdrawal of the Easibus service, the decision to withdraw funding was supported by my Department, and a decision to withdraw the other bus was taken in consultation with Translink and the Department. That decision was taken in light of the significant changes in the provision of public transport services in Bangor. Translink pointed out to the Department that passenger numbers were extremely low and that the services were largely duplicated by the more extensive Bangor town services. Not only are those town services more frequent than the Easibus services, but they start earlier in the day and end later. In those circumstances, Translink did not consider it to be an efficient use of its limited resources to continue to sustain those non-commercial services.

Some criticism of that decision seems to be based on a misunderstanding of the Easibus service as it currently operates. For example, it has been suggested that Easibus is a free service. That is not the case. In fact, there are no special concessions on Easibus. Instead, it is subject to exactly the same concessionary arrangements as apply on Translink's other scheduled services. A person who is carried free on Easibus will be carried free on Bangor town services.

It has also been suggested that Easibus is a flexible service that can deviate from its route to pick up passengers. In fact, Easibus is licensed as a stage carriage service and the conditions of that licence prevent it from operating on a demand-responsive basis. I am aware that passengers can hail and ride on sections of the Easibus route: in other words, be picked up and set down where there is no bus stop. That arrangement is not a feature of the town bus services, but I understand that, as a result of the Ulsterbus review, there has been an increase in the number of bus stops provided. Of course, Translink reviews the position of stops in response

to passenger needs. Translink has told me that more than 90% of the existing Easibus routes will also be serviced by town bus services after 30 June. There are, of course, some gaps, and Translink has been looking to see how those gaps can be plugged.

With regard to Groomsport, which does not have a town bus service, Translink intends to divert services from Ballywalter to Bangor and to provide links between Groomsport and Bloomfield Shopping Centre. I remind Members that where gaps remain or where disabled or older people find it otherwise difficult to access town bus services, there is the option of door-to-door services, which I have mentioned already.

I understand that there have been criticisms of the service, notably about its availability, and I believe that those criticisms are unfair. By its very nature, a door-to-door service requires a degree of flexibility and compromise on the part of the people who use it, and it is impossible to ensure that everyone will receive the precise journey time that they want. Nevertheless, the availability of the service has been good.

As availability of the service is an important aspect, it is monitored regularly. My Department collects statistics from the operator each month that show the number of trips taken and the number of trips refused due to the unavailability of transport. Those statistics show a refusal rate of approximately 3·4%, and that must be regarded as low for a service of that kind. My Department also monitors the attitudes of the users of door-to-door services, and following concerns about recent criticisms levelled at the service, my officials undertook a telephone survey of members in the Bangor area. The results of that survey show that 72% of those who had used the service were satisfied or very satisfied with its availability and that 84% were satisfied or very satisfied with the service overall.

I am aware that the Bangor door-to-door operational area does not cover all the areas that have been serviced by Easibus, and, in particular, the Groomsport area falls outside its parameters. However, I remind Members that people with mobility problems in Groomsport and other parts of north Down can avail themselves of similar support from my Department's rural transport fund. In particular, I wish to highlight the dial-a-lift service, which commenced on 1 December 2009 and which provides transport opportunities for individuals in rural areas and, in effect, is a door-to-door service. To qualify for that service, an individual must live in a rural area and have difficulties in accessing everyday local services due to a lack of transport. The service in the Groomsport area is provided by the local rural community transport partnership, which is Down District Accessible Transport.

I am aware that there have been several criticisms in relation to the decision to remove funding from the

Easibus service and how that removal was handled. I can assure Members that Bangor has not been singled out unfairly; Easibus services in Derry are also due to cease in June 2010. The decision to end those services followed a review that showed that the service was no longer being used wholly or mainly by people with disabilities, which is the criterion for Easibus. Although it would no longer be appropriate in this case to fund Easibus from the transport programme for people with disabilities, the service is clearly meeting a wider need, and Translink is reviewing local services to ensure that they will continue when Easibus services are withdrawn. Easibus services in Belfast are also due to be reviewed shortly.

I am aware of the criticism that Translink did not allow adequate time for consultation and, in particular, did not follow its own agreed processes. However, I am also aware that when that error was brought to Translink's attention, it extended the period before the withdrawal of the service by a further month to comply with the agreed process.

The current position in Bangor is that one Easibus has been withdrawn and the other will be withdrawn by the end of June. In the meantime, the Easibus that is funded by my Department will provide the four Easibus services on alternating days.

I am aware that Translink is making several adjustments to existing services to cushion the effects of the withdrawal of the Easibus service, and I am sure that it will continue to take a helpful approach to the design and provision of public transport services for Bangor. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Adjourned at 5.38 pm

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

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.

Published at noon on 11 January 2010

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Cold Weather Payments

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

I wish to inform Assembly Members of financial help being provided to individuals and families on low income in the form of Cold Weather Payments as a result of the recent and continuing severe period of cold weather.

A Cold Weather Payment period is triggered in our social security system when information supplied by the Met Office from its Aldergrove, Ballykelly, Castlederg, Katesbridge and Enniskillen weather stations is, or is forecast to be, zero degrees centigrade or below over seven consecutive days from November to March. Each weather station covers a range of Post Code areas within Northern Ireland. Three Cold Weather periods have been triggered for weeks ending 24 December 2009, 4 January 2010 and 11 January 2010 and these applied to all 5 of the weather station areas throughout Northern Ireland on each of these occasions.

To qualify for a Cold Weather payment a person must be receiving State Pension Credit, Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance (Income based) or Employment and Support Allowance (Income related) for one day in the period of cold weather and have one of the following:

- a relevant pensioner or disability premium
- Child Tax Credit that includes a disability or severe disability element
- a child under five years old
- an applicable amount of Employment and Support Allowance that includes either the support component or the work-related activity component.

These payments are arranged automatically by the Social Security Agency and there is no need for qualifying customers to make a claim.

Each 7 day cold weather period attracts a payment of £25 for qualifying recipients and approximately 166,000 customers have benefitted from these payments amounting to £75 each in total to date. Payments for the first two weeks of cold weather have already been issued and the third payment is expected to be received by customers by 13 January 2010.

In total, payments authorised so far amount to approximately £12.5m, which have been targeted at the most vulnerable households in Northern Ireland, should make an important contribution to wellbeing during this excessively cold spell.

The situation continues to be kept under active review and further payments will be made should the continuing inclement weather trigger further cold weather periods, according to the measurement methodology at any or all of the relevant forecasting stations.

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 8 January 2010

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Community Relations Council

Mr M Storey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 1937/10, if their Department has carried out any assessment of the effectiveness of the Community Relations Council in promoting understanding of all sections of the community. (AQW 2663/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): The CRC performance and effectiveness is measured against their Annual Business Plan. We are satisfied that they are performing well against achieving these targets this year.

Civil Servants' Earnings

Mr J Craig asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many civil servants in their Department earn more than the Ministers in their Department, inclusive of salaries, bonuses and any paid positions on outside bodies. (AQW 2951/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Within OFMDFM, 28 civil servants earned more than the Junior Ministers, 9 earned more than the First Minister and 2 earned more than the deputy First Minister.

The term "civil servants" encompasses members of the Northern Ireland Civil Service including the Senior Civil Service and, under a special arrangement, Special Advisors to Ministers. Salaries for civil servants are determined in pay scales relative to the appropriate grading structure underpinned by job evaluation methodologies. Civil Service salaries paid in 2008-2009 have been used for the purpose of this comparison.

The Ministerial salary used for comparison purposes in this response is the annual salary payable in 2008-2009 to a Ministerial Office Holder (£71,434 for the First and deputy First Ministers and £19,601 for Junior Ministers) plus the basic annual salary payable to a Member of the Legislative Assembly of £43,101. Ministers who are also in receipt of a salary as a Member of Parliament have the MLA element of their salary abated by two thirds (£43,101 reduced to £14,368). Any salary payable as an MP has not been taken into account in this comparison.

10-day Prompt Payment Scheme

Dr S Farry asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action they are taking to ensure that the 10-day prompt payment scheme is passed on to sub-contractors by businesses who are receiving direct payments from the Department, and its related public bodies. (AQW 3132/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: On 28 November 2008, the Finance Minister announced that Executive departments were taking all possible steps to pay valid invoices submitted by suppliers within a 10 day target .

A working group of the Construction Industry Forum for Northern Ireland Procurement Task Group is currently considering the expansion of the 'Code of Practice for Government Construction Clients and their

Supply Chains' to include a 'Fair Payment Charter'. The proposals will seek to ensure that main contractors pass on the benefits of prompt payment to subcontractors.

Supplies and services contracts also require main contractors to enter into subcontracts on the same terms and conditions as the main contract. Central Procurement Directorate is currently considering if the approach taken in construction contracts would be practicable in supplies and services contracts.

Review of Childcare Funding for Women's Centres

Mr P Weir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what groups their Department intends to consult with on the Review of Childcare Funding for Women's Centres. (AQW 3447/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: There are no current proposals to undertake a specific review of childcare funding for Women's Centres. On 3 February 2009 the then Junior Minister Jeffrey Donaldson undertook to bring an interim report to the Executive on funding for women's organisations, in order to secure the best possible return on investment for women and for the communities to which they contribute. To fulfil this undertaking, the intention is to provide a report for Ministers' consideration on the extent and coverage of government grants currently available to women's groups providing services in their community; how these groups support and complement the development and delivery of public policy and services; and their future funding prospects.

It is envisaged that the project board for the interim review, which will be jointly chaired by senior officials from OFMDFM/DSD, will meet for the first time in January 2010. The Gender Advisory Panel, representing key stakeholders and a wide range of skills and experience, will be invited to act as a reference group. The review team, comprising officials from OFMDFM, DSD and DFP, will seek contributions from other departments and public bodies, key voluntary and community sector representatives and other key stakeholders.

The interim review will also take account of the current work on childcare provision being undertaken by the Inter-Ministerial Group on Children and Young People. It is envisaged this will include a public consultation on a new childcare strategy.

Review of Childcare Funding for Women's Centres

Mr P Weir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the review of Childcare Funding for Women's Centres. (AQW 3448/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: There are no current proposals to undertake a specific review of childcare funding for Women's Centres. On 3 February 2009 the then Junior Minister Jeffrey Donaldson undertook to bring an interim report to the Executive on funding for women's organisations, in order to secure the best possible return on investment for women and for the communities to which they contribute. To fulfil this undertaking, the intention is to provide a report for Ministers' consideration on the extent and coverage of government grants currently available to women's groups providing services in their community; how these groups support and complement the development and delivery of public policy and services; and their future funding prospects.

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The interim review will also take account of the current work on childcare provision being undertaken by the Inter-Ministerial Group on Children and Young People. It is envisaged this will include a public consultation on a new childcare strategy.

Review of Funding of Women's Centres

Mr P Weir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what groups have been, or will be, consulted on the Review of Funding of Women's Centres. (AQW 3449/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: There are no current proposals to undertake a specific review of childcare funding for Women's Centres. On 3 February 2009 the then Junior Minister Jeffrey Donaldson undertook to bring an interim report to the Executive on funding for women's organisations, in order to secure the best possible return on investment for women and for the communities to which they contribute. To fulfil this undertaking, the intention is to provide a report for Ministers' consideration on the extent and coverage of government grants currently available to women's groups providing services in their community; how these groups support and complement the development and delivery of public policy and services; and their future funding prospects.

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The interim review will also take account of the current work on childcare provision being undertaken by the Inter-Ministerial Group on Children and Young People. It is envisaged this will include a public consultation on a new childcare strategy.

Review of Funding of Women's Centres

Mr P Weir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Review of Funding of Women's Centres. (AQW 3450/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: There are no current proposals to undertake a specific review of childcare funding for Women's Centres. On 3 February 2009 the then Junior Minister Jeffrey Donaldson undertook to bring an interim report to the Executive on funding for women's organisations, in order to secure the best possible return on investment for women and for the communities to which they contribute. To fulfil this undertaking, the intention is to provide a report for Ministers' consideration on the extent and coverage of government grants currently available to women's groups providing services in their community; how these groups support and complement the development and delivery of public policy and services; and their future funding prospects.

It is envisaged that the project board for the interim review, which will be jointly chaired by senior officials from OFMDFM/DSD, will meet for the first time in January 2010. The Gender Advisory Panel, representing key stakeholders and a wide range of skills and experience, will be invited to act as a reference group. The review team, comprising officials from OFMDFM, DSD and DFP, will seek contributions from other departments and public bodies, key voluntary and community sector representatives and other key stakeholders.

The interim review will also take account of the current work on childcare provision being undertaken by the Inter-Ministerial Group on Children and Young People. It is envisaged this will include a public consultation on a new childcare strategy.

Review of Funding of Women's Centres

Mr P Weir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister if a steering group has been appointed to review the Funding of Women's Centres; and if so, whether a chair or consultant has been appointed. (AQW 3451/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: There are no current proposals to undertake a specific review of childcare funding for Women's Centres. On 3 February 2009 the then Junior Minister Jeffrey Donaldson undertook to bring an interim report to the Executive on funding for women's organisations, in order to secure the best possible return on investment for women and for the communities to which they contribute. To fulfil this undertaking, the intention is to provide a report for Ministers' consideration on the extent and coverage of government grants currently available to women's groups providing services in their community; how these groups support and complement the development and delivery of public policy and services; and their future funding prospects.

It is envisaged that the project board for the interim review, which will be jointly chaired by senior officials from OFMDFM/DSD, will meet for the first time in January 2010. The Gender Advisory Panel, representing key stakeholders and a wide range of skills and experience, will be invited to act as a reference group. The review

team, comprising officials from OFMDFM, DSD and DFP, will seek contributions from other departments and public bodies, key voluntary and community sector representatives and other key stakeholders.

The interim review will also take account of the current work on childcare provision being undertaken by the Inter-Ministerial Group on Children and Young People. It is envisaged this will include a public consultation on a new childcare strategy.

Civil Servants' Earnings

Mr P Weir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many civil servants in their Department receive an annual salary (i) between £37,801-£43,100; (ii) between £43,101-50,537; (iii) between £50,538-71,433; (iv) between £71,434-82,975; and (v) above £82,976. (AQW 3494/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The number of OFMDFM civil servants in each of the specified pay bands is as follows:

Salary band	Number of OFMDFM staff
(i) £37,801 - £43,100	27
(ii) £43,101 – 50,537	19
(iii) £50,538 – 71,433	22
(iv) £71,434 – 82,975	9
(v) above £82,976	8

The term “civil servants” encompasses members of the Northern Ireland Civil Service including the Senior Civil Service and, under a special arrangement, Special Advisors to Ministers. Salaries for civil servants are determined in pay scales relative to the appropriate grading structure underpinned by job evaluation methodologies.

Economic Crisis

Mr P McGlone asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what new initiatives, measures and practices have been implemented by their Department as a means of assisting the community and achieving improved, efficient decision-making during the current economic crisis. (AQW 3573/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Executive has worked together to tackle the economic downturn and we have continued to meet various interest groups to listen to key concerns. We set up the Cross Sector Advisory Forum (CSAF) to continue this dialogue in a systematic manner and to identify recommendations for remedial action. Ministerial led sub-groups have been established to take forward detailed work of the CSAF.

The latest meeting of the CSAF took place at the beginning of October and Ministerial chairs of the sub-groups were asked to submit recommendations by 31st October 2009. These are now being considered and a consolidated report on these returns will be produced in the New Year.

We continue to pay close attention to the impact of the recession on the local economy and this continues to be a standing item on the agenda of Executive meetings.

As stated in our Programme for Government, we are taking forward the most wide ranging reform of public services for a generation. At the heart of this reform programme is a commitment to world class public services which meet the needs of the economy and wider society. Modernising the infrastructure and processes of the civil service is a key part of our reform programme. Our aim is to reduce costs and cut out bureaucracy by sharing key corporate services such as human resources, finance and ICT across Departments. This will realise significant savings which will be redirected to delivering key services direct to the public.

Under the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007, and subsequently Budget 2008-2011, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, along with other Departments is required to find cash releasing efficiency savings of 3% this year, reductions in administration costs of 5% and real savings, on a without exception basis to

the administration element of the budgets of all Non Departmental Public Bodies and sponsored bodies. Any cash releasing efficiency savings count toward the overall 3% target.

The Performance, Efficiency and Delivery Unit was established to examine scope to deliver savings over and above the 3% which has been set.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Lough Erne

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the highest legal water level in Lough Erne; (ii) the lowest legal water level in Lough Erne; (iii) the legal water level in Lough Erne before spilling is permitted at Ballyshannon; and (iv) the water level in Lough Erne on 4 November 2009.

(AQW 3339/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew):

- (i) the highest statutory water level in Lower Lough Erne is 152' 0" AOD Poolbeg and the highest statutory water level in Upper Lough Erne is 155' 0" AOD Poolbeg.
- (ii) The lowest statutory water level in Lower Lough Erne is 147'0" AOD Poolbeg. The lowest statutory level for Upper Lough Erne is not specified, but by default is 150'0" AOD Poolbeg as The River Erne through Enniskillen is specified as at no time to fall below 150'0" AOD Poolbeg.
- (iii) Spilling from Lower Lough Erne must commence if the water level in it rises to 151'6" AOD Poolbeg and the water level in Upper Lough Erne is 154'0" AOD Poolbeg, is rising, and is in the opinion of the Departments engineer or the Electricity Supply Board's engineer likely to rise above 155'0" AOD Poolbeg. Spilling would continue until the Lower Lough falls to 151'6" AOD Poolbeg.
- (iv) The water level in Lower Lough Erne on 4 November 2009 was 151'5" AOD Poolbeg. The water level in Upper Lough Erne on 4 November 2009 was 154'0" AOD Poolbeg.

Lough Erne

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will review the current policy of dredging Upper Lough Erne.

(AQW 3341/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As part of the transfer of functions in 1999, responsibility for watercourse navigation transferred from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. This responsibility has since then passed to Waterways Ireland. Dredging of parts of Upper and Lower Lough Erne was carried out by DARD in the past in order to allow for the passage of boats. With the transfer of responsibility above, DARD no longer has a policy regarding dredging of Upper and Lower Lough Erne.

Civil Servants' Earnings

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many civil servants within her Department, inclusive of salaries, bonuses and any paid positions on outside bodies, earn more than the salary of a departmental Minister of £80,902.

(AQW 3453/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There are a total of 5 civil servants in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development who earn more than the salary of a Departmental Minister of £80,902. This is based on salary records relating specifically to their employment in the Department for the current financial year.

There is no requirement for the Department to hold remuneration details for staff with paid positions on outside bodies.

Farmers Living in Poverty

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many farmers can be classified as living in poverty; and to outline the indicators used for this classification. (AQW 3468/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development collects and publishes data annually on farm business profits for a range of farm types and a variety of farm sizes. In order to assess the extent of farmer poverty, additional information on off-farm earnings, transfer payments and income from investments would be required both for the farmer and for all other members of the farm household. These data are not available to the Department and, therefore, it is not possible to estimate the extent or degree of farmer poverty.

Temporary Crisis Framework

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she intends to access the European Commission's amended Temporary Crisis Framework which allows EU Member States to provide farmers with a payment of up to €15,000 in state aid until the end of 2010. (AQW 3472/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Temporary Community Framework is a mechanism for State aid measures to support access to finance in the current financial and economic crisis.

Member States are required to notify the Commission of their intention to avail of the amended Temporary Community Framework and to receive Commission approval before any payments can be considered. The notification must contain agriculture-specific data to support any claim that farmers have been adversely affected by the current economic difficulties. Defra are currently working on a notification on behalf of Britain and the north of Ireland.

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what targets her Department set within the Investing for Health strategy; and what progress has been made to date against these targets. (AQW 3503/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: No formal targets were set for DARD within the Investing for Health Strategy. However, the Department does take every opportunity to promote awareness of health issues and, for example, the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise supports student health through disseminating information on healthy eating, the impact of alcohol/substance abuse on health, promoting mental and sexual health by working with local agencies and Health and Social Services.

In addition, through our Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion framework my Department is contributing to the elimination of poverty and reduction of social exclusion in rural areas. Working with other Departments, funding from this programme has been used for the development of an assisted rural transport scheme, the installation of heating and insulation systems in rural dwellings, a rural childcare programme, community development and maximising access to services, grants and benefits in the most disadvantaged rural areas. It also contains a rural challenge programme which will support projects from the most vulnerable groups addressing issues such as health and well-being, education, housing issues, transport, employment, low pay, social and recreational opportunities linked to well being.

Welfare of Animals Bill & Dangerous Dogs Bill

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the timetable for the legislative passage of (i) the Welfare of Animals Bill; and (ii) the Dangerous Dogs Bill. (AQW 3522/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Welfare of Animals Bill and Dog Control Bill are key priorities for me and I intend to bring both Bills through to enactment during the lifetime of this Assembly. The legislative timetable for both Bills are outlined:

Welfare of Animals Bill

- (i) The Executive at their meeting on 5 November 2009 endorsed the final policy proposals for a new Welfare of Animals Bill and agreed to the drafting of the Bill. My officials are currently preparing instructions for the Office of the Legislative Council (OLC) and the actual Bill will be drafted in early 2010. It is my intention, subject to Executive approval, to progress the new Bill through to introduction to the Assembly by June 2010.

Dog Control Bill

- (ii) Following Executive approval on 5 November 2009, I launched a public consultation on policy proposals for a new Dog Control Bill on 23 November. Consultation will run until 1 February 2010. Details of my proposals, and how to respond to the consultation, are available on my Department's website.

Following consideration of the responses to the consultation, I intend to seek the agreement of the Executive to the final policy content of the proposed Dog Control Bill in the spring and thereafter to the introduction of the Bill to the Assembly by June 2010.

It is proposed, that both Bills will complete their formal Assembly stages and reach the statute book within the lifetime of the current Assembly.

Protection of Dams

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she intends to take to increase the regulation of dams, to bring the levels of protection in Northern Ireland up to the standard of the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQW 3527/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Regulatory control of reservoir safety was identified as a policy gap by the independent Flood Risk Management Policy Review carried out in 2007. Government's response to this review "Living with Rivers & the Sea" identified the need to take forward appropriate legislation relative to this area of work. Work to secure the additional resource necessary for this new work area is ongoing.

Economic Crisis

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what new initiatives, measures and practices have been implemented by her Department as a means of assisting the community and achieving improved, efficient decision-making during the current economic crisis. (AQW 3529/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: A wide range of my Department's activities are already aimed at assisting individuals and organisations in making effective choices in relation to their own personal or business decisions. In recent times, for example, the Department has provided financial support to farmers under the Agriculture Flooding Hardship Scheme and to fishermen under the Financial Assistance to the NI Fishing Industry Scheme. The promotion of the NI Rural Development Programme (2007-2013) is also aimed at raising awareness of the range of funding and support that is available for farm diversification, business creation, village renewal and farm modernisation, initiatives that will be welcomed in the current economic climate.

I also chair the Agriculture Sub-Group of the Cross Sector Advisory Forum. The Agriculture Sub-Group was established to create a dialogue with key stakeholders and identify practical steps which could help alleviate the impact of the economic downturn.

Illegal Fishing Activity

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm the outcome of the investigation into allegations of breaches of fishing regulations by the 'Emil Grazza'. (AQW 3581/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Following investigation into alleged illegal fishing activity in Belfast Lough by the vessel Emerald Gratia on 20 May 2008, a prosecution file was submitted to the Public Prosecution Service.

After consideration, the PPS directed that this matter could not be proceeded with because the case did not contain sufficient evidential value to consider proceedings against any party.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Recruitment of Teachers

Dr S Farry asked the Minister of Education what steps are being taken to ensure that there is no discrimination in the recruitment of teachers, as a result of job specifications which differentiate between those with experience in permanent posts and those with experience in temporary or supply teaching posts.

(AQW 1668/10)

Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane): An 'Equal Opportunities Policy for Teachers in Schools' which includes reference to recruitment and selection, has been agreed by the Teachers' Negotiating Committee and issued to all schools for adoption by Boards of Governors. The responsibility for developing job specifications rests with the Boards of Governors of individual schools and they must comply with relevant employment and equality legislation. Eligibility criteria used for recruitment, selection or promotion must be related to ability to do the job and must be non-discriminatory. Eligibility criteria must also be made known to prospective applicants.

Léiríonn an traenáil ar earcaíocht agus roghnúchán atá ar fáil do gach Príomhoide agus do na Boird Gobharnóirí go léir an tábhacht a bhaineann lena áirithiú go bhfuil gach gné de na critéir áirithe oibiachtúil agus go mbaineann siad leis an phost. Tugtar le fios do Bhoird Gobharnóirí nár cheart dóibh leithcheal neamhdhleathach a dhéanamh agus próisis earcaíochta á ndéanamh acu.

Training on recruitment and selection is offered to all Principals and Boards of Governors, which emphasises the importance of ensuring that all aspects of the specific criteria are objective and job related. Boards of Governors are also advised that they must not unlawfully discriminate when carrying out recruitment processes.

I have been informed by the employing authorities that the experience criterion does not differentiate between those with experience in permanent posts and those with experience in temporary or supply teaching posts. All experience (temporary or permanent) is taken into account when checking applications against criteria. If an employing authority finds evidence of inappropriate practice it does not ratify the appointment(s).

Catholic Maintained Schools

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Education how many Catholic maintained schools are in the ownership of the public sector.

(AQW 2139/10)

Minister of Education: Tá 474 scoil san earnáil Chaitliceach faoi chothabháil. Coinnítear na scoileanna seo ar Iontaobhas le haghaidh feidhmeanna oideachais chun cead a thabhairt don Roinn Oideachais deontas caipitil a íoc. I mórán cásanna, is comhlachtaí cláraithe iad na hiontaobhaithe atá faoi theorainn ráthaíochta agus nach bhfuil scairchaipiteal acu. Éilíonn reachtaíocht go mbeadh scoileanna Caitliceacha faoi chothabháil faoi uinéireacht Iontaobhaithe Scoile agus, mar gheall air sin, níl aon scoil faoi uinéireacht na hEaglaise Caitlicí, Easpag na hEaglaise Caitlicí, ná an earnáil phoiblí.

There are 474 schools in the Catholic maintained sector. These are held on Trust for educational purposes to permit the Department of Education to pay capital grant. In many cases the Trustees are registered companies limited by guarantee and not having a share capital. Therefore as legislation requires Catholic maintained schools to be in the ownership of School Trustees, none are owned by the Catholic Church, Bishops of the Catholic Church or the public sector.

Catholic Maintained Schools

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Education how many Catholic maintained schools are in the ownership of (i) the Catholic Church; and (ii) Bishops of the Catholic Church.

(AQW 2197/10)

Minister of Education: Tá 474 scoil san earnáil Chaitliceach faoi chothabháil. Coinnítear na scoileanna seo ar Iontaobhas le haghaidh feidhmeanna oideachais chun cead a thabhairt don Roinn Oideachais deontas caipitil a íoc. I mórán cásanna, is comhlachtaí cláraithe iad na hiontaobhaithe atá faoi theorainn ráthaíochta agus nach bhfuil scairchaipiteal acu. Éilíonn reachtaíocht go mbeadh scoileanna Caitliceacha faoi chothabháil faoi

uinéireacht Iontaobhaithe Scoile agus, mar gheall air sin, níl aon scoil faoi uinéireacht na hEaglaise Caitlicí, Easpag na hEaglaise Caitlicí, ná an earnáil phoiblí.

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DEPARTMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

South Eastern Regional College

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of enrolments for the South Eastern Regional College in Newtownards and Bangor for (i) 2008; and (ii) 2009. (AQW 3362/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): There were 6,946 enrolments on Professional and Technical Courses at the Bangor Campus of the South Eastern Regional College in 2007/08 with a further 2,596 at the Newtownards Campus. In addition to these accredited Courses, there were 908 hobby and leisure enrolments at the Bangor Campus in 2007/08 and 422 hobby and leisure enrolments at the Newtownards Campus.

Full-year data for 2008/09 are currently being validated and will be available for publication in January 2010. My Department will forward these to you once these are available.

Source: Further Education Statistical Record.

Access Courses

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many people are enrolled on Access courses at the Coleraine and Limavady campuses of the North West Regional College. (AQW 3443/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: In the 2007/08 academic year there were 117 enrolments on Access courses at the Coleraine Campus of Northern Regional College. In the same academic year there were 74 enrolments on Access courses at the Limavady Campus of North West Regional College.

The 2007/08 data is the latest available at present.

Source: Further Education Statistical Record.

Civil Servants' Earnings

Mr J Craig asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 2956/10, to detail (i) the job titles; (ii) pay scale; and (iii) the total amount earned by the civil servants in question. (AQW 3444/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Pursuant to the answer to AQW 2956/10, the details of the current members of staff employed by the Department for Employment and Learning are as follows:

Job title	Pay Band	Total Earned 2008/09
Acting Permanent Secretary	Pay Band 3 £98,059 - £205,000	£90,000 - £95,000
Deputy Secretary	Pay Band 2 £81,600 - £160,000	£100,000 - £105,000

As individuals could be identified, the exact salary has not been declared. The salary details have been provided in £5k bands, as would be listed in the Departmental Resource Accounts.

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what targets his Department set within the Investing for Health strategy; and what progress has been made to date against these targets. (AQW 3517/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has no specific targets in the Investing for Health Strategy. However, my Department is actively involved in a number of the Interdepartmental Groups that have been established to address key themes in Investing for Health, for example Suicide, Domestic and Sexual Violence, Drugs and Alcohol, Physical Activity, Obesity, Tobacco Action Plan, Mental Health and Learning Disability. The Department is committed fully to playing its part in these important areas of work.

In light of the direct correlation between poverty, poor educational attainment and poor health, DEL contributes to the goals and objectives of the Investing for Health Strategy through its overall activities towards the achievement of its own strategic goals and objectives (reflected in DEL PSA targets), rather than through specific targets attributed to my Department. This is reflected in the text of the Strategy and covers the spectrum of my Department's activities in the fields of employment and skills, including targets set for Essential Skills and also, for example, the policies of Further and Higher Education institutions in relation to healthy living, drugs and alcohol, and the support made available to students via a range of pastoral care services.

Economic Crisis

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what new initiatives, measures and practices have been implemented in his Department as a means of assisting the community and achieving improved, efficient decision-making during the current economic crisis. (AQW 3525/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department has undertaken a range of measures to mitigate the effects of the economic downturn on the community.

In September, I launched information packs to provide practical help to employers and individuals affected by the current economic downturn.

The information packs summarise the full range of measures which will benefit individuals and employers, and contain information and advice, offering solutions and opportunities to enable people to plan their future path with confidence.

The Department has also published a suite of sectoral, regional and sub-regional Labour Market Information to help people make informed labour market decisions through the downturn and beyond. These publications are assisting both the Careers Service and the Employment Service as they seek to provide their clients with information and guidance on education, training, employment and careers opportunities.

Within the Employment Service, against a background of a Jobs Seekers Allowance claimant count increase from 29,554 in September 2008 to 52,537 in November 2009 (a rise of 77.8%), measures have been taken to improve the provision of key services, such as moving to four-weekly job search, prioritisation of clients and streamlining of processes. The Employment Service has also recruited 99 new staff to date to deal with rising unemployment and the search for new work.

The Department, in conjunction with the Social Security Agency, Invest NI, the Educational Guidance Service for Adults and the Careers Service, also provide an on-site redundancy support service. From 1 April 2009 to 9 December 2009, we were been notified of, or identified, 76 employers who proposed making redundancies, affecting 6,489 employees. To date, 22 employers have accepted the Department's offer of support, with 34 redundancy clinics having been held, whilst 14 others are presently considering the offer of support.

A further action is the new waged strand, 'Step Ahead', that has been introduced within the Steps to Work programme. This initiative will provide up to 1,000 temporary jobs in the community/voluntary sector in direct response to the increasing numbers who are long term unemployed or economically inactive. Step Ahead is expected to remain in place for up to two years and will provide 26 weeks' temporary employment for those who have been out of work for over 30 months.

On the skills side, the Department has developed a programme for up to two years based on the content of the current Apprenticeship programme (i.e. skills training, technical certificate and Essential Skills) but without the requirement of employment (an element of work experience will be included). The new 'Programme-

Led Apprenticeship' provision was introduced on 7 September 2009 and initial provision has been made for approximately 3,000 trainees at a cost of £12m. At 26 November, there were 2,908 trainees registered on the programme.

In higher education, the Department is investing in the all-island research capacity and capability of the two Northern Ireland universities. To March 2011, the total investment in the research base will be £17.2m, including an investment of around £11.8m to create approximately 120 new research/technician posts.

In the further education sector, all six colleges have in place a wide range of existing and newly developed initiatives to help employers and individuals during the downturn. An example is the 'Rapid Response Northern Ireland' programme, which is being funded through the Department's Innovation Fund. This programme, led by South Eastern Regional College, will provide a portfolio of services to support the needs of employers and employees across Northern Ireland during the economic downturn.

Finally, the First Minister and deputy First Minister established a Cross- Sector Advisory Forum at the end of 2008 to review the local impact of the current economic downturn on local people and businesses and make recommendations for addressing problems arising from the economic crisis.

Jointly with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I chair the CSAF sub-group devoted to Business and Skills. We have ensured that our work dovetails with that of the Economic Development Forum, and have recently made a number of recommendations which will shortly be considered by the Executive.

Civil Servants' Earnings

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many civil servants in his Department receive an annual salary (i) between £37,801-£43,100; (ii) between £43,101-50,537; (iii) between £50,538-71,433; (iv) between £71,434-82,975; and (v) above £82,975. (AQW 3564/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The number of civil servants in the Department for Employment and Learning who receive an annual salary (i) between £37,801-£43,100; (ii) between £43,101- £50,537; (iii) between £50,538- £71,433; (iv) between £71,434- £82,975; and (v) above £82,975 is as follows:

Salary Band	Number of civil servants included
£37,801-£43,100	36
£43,101- £50,537	14
£50,538- £71,433	16
£71,434- £82,975	0
above £82,975	2
Total	68

DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Proposed Rose Energy Incinerator

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given the advanced stage of the due diligence by Invest NI on the funding required for the proposed Rose Energy Poultry Litter Incinerator, to detail (i) the approximate funding required from Invest NI and the Department; (ii) if the funding has been budgeted for; and (iii) where the funding will come from. (AQW 3355/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): Invest NI continues to evaluate this project and the due diligence process is at an advanced stage. The outcome of this will determine if, and to what extent an offer of financial support will be made and the provision of funding. Details of proposed funding and budget allocations are confidential.

Invest NI

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the total sum of any current outstanding rent arrears owed by tenants of Invest NI owned properties; and the number of tenants who are currently in arrears. (AQW 3401/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI offers its client companies a range of property solutions in support of their economic development projects; the provision of properties for rent is one of the options available.

There are currently five tenants with rental arrears totalling c£84,614. The annual income which Invest NI derives from the rental of its properties is c£1,822,000.

Invest NI seeks to ensure that all money due in respect of rental payments is paid on time and in full. It will continue to work closely, on a case by case basis, with those tenants currently in arrears to agree mutually acceptable payment plans.

In its dealings with clients, Invest NI is mindful of the current economic climate and the impact it has had on businesses.

Kilroot Power Station

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if her Department has assessed the potential for Kilroot power station to co-fire its main fuel source of coal with poultry litter. (AQW 3462/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department has not carried out any detailed assessment of the potential for Kilroot Power Station to co-fire its main fuel source of coal with poultry litter.

The Department did, however, require AES Kilroot to conduct a study on the scope for use of biomass co-firing at its plant as a condition of its Article 39 consent, granted in December 2005, for the fitting of flue gas desulphurisation equipment.

AES Kilroot has advised the Department that limited biomass co-firing trials in the past at their plant have highlighted the technical difficulties with co-firing. Modification of the existing units at Kilroot to allow co-firing of biomass products, such as poultry litter, is not considered to be a practical option by AES.

Kilroot Power Station

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if her Department has compared the capital construction costs of the proposed Rose Energy incinerator at Glenavy, including the proposed Invest NI subsidy, with the costs of modifying the existing Kilroot power station to allow it to co-fire coal with poultry litter. (AQW 3463/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department has not compared the capital construction costs of the proposed Rose Energy incinerator with the costs of modifying the existing Kilroot power station to allow it to co-fire coal with poultry litter.

Rose Energy

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she can guarantee that there are no cheaper methods available for the processing and disposal of poultry litter other than the current proposal by Rose Energy at Glenavy. (AQW 3464/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI continues to evaluate this project and the due diligence process is at an advanced stage. This considers the economics of the project including viability of the process involved. Until completion of the evaluation I am unable to comment on alternative methods.

New Initiatives

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what new initiatives, measures and practices have been implemented in her Department as a means of assisting the community and achieving improved, efficient decision making during the current economic crisis. (AQW 3502/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department has implemented the following actions in response to the current economic crisis:-

1. Launch of the Accelerated Support Fund (ASF)

The £5 million Accelerated Support Fund (ASF) was launched in September 2008 by Invest NI, to offer businesses targeted support to address specific issues arising due to the current economic conditions. To date 112 applications for support have been approved, and this, combined with over 500 Diagnostic interventions has committed a total £4.9 million of grant support.

2. Organising 'Credit Crunch' Seminars

Between September 2008 and March 2009, Invest NI organised 14 seminars across Northern Ireland on the theme of 'Challenges and Opportunities – The Credit Crunch' events across the province. These provided clients with the opportunity to avail of 3 - 5 days of free diagnostic support on a range of key issues from qualified business advisors.

In tandem with these events, Invest NI, in partnership with local councils, Enterprise NI and local Enterprise Agencies also staged ten seminars across Northern Ireland to offer practical advice to local businesses on how to deal with the impact of the downturn.

3. Launch of the new Research & Development (R&D) Grant

The new grant for R & D, which was launched by Invest NI in December 2008, is designed to provide streamlined, transparent and accessible support for R&D and technological innovation relevant at all stages of company development. It will help underpin the delivery of the Matrix imperatives for the future of the Northern Ireland knowledge economy. Part funded by the European Regional Development Fund, the new Grant offers a user-friendly holistic approach to R&D support and supercedes a number of Invest NI's previous business R&D programmes.

4. Launch of the Short Term Aid Scheme (STAS)

In May 2009 I announced a new £15 million Short Term Aid Scheme to help businesses experiencing difficulty retain key staff during the economic downturn. The scheme is open to companies across the manufacturing and tradable services sectors that have experienced difficulty since July 2008, with grant support provided for agreed existing key posts in a company based on eligible salary costs.

5. An increase in Advisory Services to Companies

Invest NI continues to increase its support across their range of advisory services, assisting companies to control energy and waste costs, helping them improve their ICT systems and up to date and relevant information through the nibusinessinfo website.

6. Implementation of the Economic Development Forum (EDF) sub-groups on the economic downturn, manufacturing and exports

My Department was represented on the Economic Development Forum (EDF) sub-groups which I set up to consider what further measures could be implemented to help business (specifically those in the manufacturing and export sectors) through the economic downturn. The sub-groups have reported on a list of proposals which continue to be monitored and updated on the specific actions that are being taken. Work is ongoing in this area and DETI officials are liaising with Business Alliance representatives to progress further. An update of this work will be provided to OFMDFM early in the New Year.

7. Developing an Assistance to Business Table

The Assistance to Business Table developed by DETI Officials is intended to inform Small to Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) of the range of access to finance initiatives introduced at European, UK and local level during the current economic downturn. This table is available on the DETI website, at www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk and has been circulated to politicians and business representative bodies.

8. Supporting the MATRIX Panel's Recommendations

In its first report, the MATRIX Panel recommended that, if our small and medium sized businesses are to compete more effectively in global markets, they should form new collaborative Industry-led Innovation Communities delivering improvements in scale, product ranges and efficiency. A number of these communities are already being established by Northern Ireland businesses with the active support and facilitation of Invest NI, DETI and MATRIX. An ad hoc support system has been put in place to facilitate the emerging Industry-led Innovation Communities. This will develop into a more sustained mechanism for IICs, the Government Innovation Gateway, by summer 2010.

9. Developing a Revised Strategy Energy Framework DETI is also committed to ensuring that energy policy in Northern Ireland focuses on addressing energy costs, building competitive energy markets and protecting our future by enhancing the reliability and sustainability of our energy supply and consumption.

With the launch of its pre-consultation scoping document in November 2008, DETI began a process aimed at identifying and securing consensus on the strategic energy priorities for Northern Ireland over the next ten years and beyond. Feedback from the scoping paper and a number of related energy workshops helped inform, develop and shape a revised draft Strategic Energy Framework which will set out the proposed priorities for Northern Ireland's energy future over the next ten years and to outline the key energy goals in terms of competition, security of supply, sustainability and infrastructure.

10. Providing an Enhanced Debt Advice Service

Citizens Advice is currently under contract to provide, at a cost of £400,000 each year for three years, a free face-to-face debt advice service to Northern Ireland debtors. Latest figures show that the service dealt with 1092 new clients during April to November 2009 handling £6.3 million of consumer debt.

A new telephone-based debt advice contract worth £800,000 and operated by A4E commenced on 1 September 2009 and will run until 31 March 2011. So far the new service had handled 420 calls and handled £3.2 million of consumer debt and has established 16 separate referral channels.

A further face-to-face debt advice contract worth £820,000 was awarded to Advice NI. It commenced in November 2009 and will run until 31 March 2011. It will complement the existing network of advisers and will provide 15 advisers operating new services in Armagh, Ballymena, Belfast, Cookstown, Portadown, Downpatrick, Limavady, Lisburn, Magherafelt, Moyle, Omagh and Strabane.

11. Empowering Consumers through the Cost of Living Campaign

The Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (CCNI) through its Cost of Living Campaign has helped empower consumers so they can make the best decisions about their money by providing price watch information on home heating oil and diesel through its website. CCNI have also undertaken an information campaign to raise awareness.

12. Assistance to Industrial and Provident Societies entering Administration

As a result of the economic crisis one of Northern Ireland's Industrial and Provident Societies, the Presbyterian Mutual Society (PMS), got into financial difficulties and was unable to meet demands for withdrawals. In response to this DETI took action for an Order to be made to enable the PMS to enter administration. This was to provide a better outcome for members of the Society than would have been the case with the precipitate sale of its assets which would have ensued following liquidation.

In all its activities, including those listed above, my Department strives to adopt a robust approach to effective, efficient and accountable decision making. All staff are encouraged to consider and develop new and innovative ideas about how the Department can better deliver its services particularly in responding to the economic downturn.

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what targets her Department set within the Investing for Health strategy; and what progress has been made to date against these targets. (AQW 3518/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DETI has, through its sponsored non-departmental public body the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSNI), contributed in part to the Investing for Health strategy target to reduce by one tenth the number of accidental injuries and deaths in the home, workplace and from collisions on the road in the period 2000 to 2010. Specifically in relation to the workplace there has been a 27% reduction in the number of reportable workplace injuries in the period 2000-2008.

Cross-Border Consumers

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she has any plans to build upon the significant numbers of people from the Republic of Ireland who are crossing the border to buy goods at an estimated value of over £390 million this year to date. (AQW 3537/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) delivers a year round programme of targeted marketing campaigns to promote Northern Ireland to Republic of Ireland (ROI) residents. The most recent evaluation of this activity shows hugely encouraging results; the summer 2009 campaign generated £10.6 million to the local economy. Overall 2009 has seen significant growth in overnight visitors from the ROI, with a 31% increase in visitor numbers during the first half of the year and a corresponding 37% increase in spend.

Within the NITB marketing activity, specific shopping centre promotional activity has been carried out to reach the huge number of shoppers from ROI visiting Northern Ireland; this activity aims to entice shoppers to either extend their visit or indeed return again for a short break. This activity will continue to play a key role in NITB's marketing activity. The autumn campaign has just been completed, while the spring 2010 campaign is currently being developed.

Civil Servants' Earnings

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many civil servants in her Department receive an annual salary (i) between £37,801-£43,100; (ii) between £43,101-50,537; (iii) between £50,538-71,433; (iv) between £71,434-82,975; and (v) above £82,975. (AQW 3562/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Salary Range (as at 14 December 2009)	Number Of Civil Servants
£37,801-£43,100	40
£43,101-50,537	19
£50,538-71,433	12
£71,434-82,975	3
above £82,975	1

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Pumping Station, Portadown

Mr D Simpson asked the Minister of the Environment whether the pumping station at the junction of the Gilford Road and Russwood Park, Portadown, has planning permission, and if not, what action his Department intends to take. (AQW 3383/10)

Minister of the Environment (Mr E Poots): On 8 October 2008, Northern Ireland Water was granted planning permission for a new Pumping Station at the junction of Russwood Park and Gilford Road, Portadown under application N/2007/0875/F. The proposal involved a new pumping station to be located underground with the only above ground elements being a control panel kiosk and a telemetry pole. However in November 2009, following commencement of works on site, Planning Service received a number of complaints regarding the size of the kiosk being erected on site. Planning Service has investigated the matter and confirmed that the kiosk as erected does not have the benefit of planning permission as it is larger than approved and located in a different position on the site. Planning Service has since requested a full planning application in order to fully assess the acceptability of the larger kiosk. To date, an amended application has not been received.

Planning Applications

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if he would consider introducing an on-line tracking system to enable applicants to trace the progress of their planning applications. (AQW 3459/10)

Minister of the Environment: Planning Service has already introduced an on-line tracking system known as Planning Explorer which enables the public to search for and to track the progress of a planning application at all stages through its process. It also provides details of valid planning applications that are being advertised during a particular period and details of applications that are being presented to district councils as part of the statutory consultation process. Planning Explorer on the Agency's web site is updated automatically on a daily basis.

On the completion and implementation of the e-PIC system in 2010, the functionality provided by Planning Explorer will be upgraded and replaced by Public Access.

Planning Applications

Mr P Butler asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (i) how many planning applications his Department has asked Lisburn council's Planning Committee to defer; and (ii) the location and details of these planning applications. (AQW 3483/10)

Minister of the Environment: My Department has not asked Lisburn City Council to defer any planning applications.

Legislation

Mr D Kinahan asked the Minister of the Environment to provide a timetable for legislation which his Department plans to bring before the Assembly by 2011. (AQW 3487/10)

Minister of the Environment: My Department is currently working to bring a range of primary legislation before the Assembly by 2011, and plans to introduce six Bills by the dates indicated in the table below. These dates are subject to Environment Committee consideration and Executive Committee approval as appropriate. My Department also intends to bring a number of pieces of subordinate legislation to the Assembly for approval by Affirmative Resolution, however, I am unable to confirm a timetable for the relevant debates at this stage.

Title	Proposed Date for Introduction to the Assembly
Local Government Finance Bill	January 2010
Waste and Contaminated Land (Amendment) Bill	January/February 2010
Local Government Reorganisation Bill	May 2010
Planning Reform Bill	June 2010
High Hedges Bill	June 2010
Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill	June 2010

Private Hire Taxis

Ms A Lo asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department is taking to prevent private hire taxis operating on a public hire basis; and if he would consider amending existing legislation to prevent this. (AQW 3488/10)

Minister of the Environment: During the period 1 August 2009 to 31 October 2009, the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) carried out 44 taxi enforcement operations in Belfast and scrutinised 238 taxis and drivers at the roadside for compliance.

Throughout these operations, enforcement officers directed unbooked private hire taxis away from busy pedestrian areas where evidence of pre-booked fares could not be established. Of these, 59 drivers who were suspected of plying for hire received advice and warnings. A further 18 drivers who were detected picking up

passengers without pre-bookings were subjected to ongoing disciplinary action, which may lead to the suspension or revocation of their taxi driver licences, PSV licences (taxi plates) or both.

The Taxis Act, which gives the Department powers to reform and modernise the taxi industry, provides for the introduction of a single licensing system. When this is introduced it will be possible to hail any taxi in the street. However, only wheelchair-accessible taxis will be able to stand at taxi ranks or pick up passengers within a specified distance of taxi ranks. The Department is committed to implementing the changes over a five year period.

Civil Servants' Earnings

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how many civil servants within his Department receive an annual salary in excess of (i) £37,801; (ii) £43,101; (iii) £50,538; (iv) £71,434; and (v) £82,976. (AQW 3490/10)

Minister of the Environment: There are two hundred and twenty-two (222) civil servants who receive an annual salary in excess of (i) £37,801; (ii) £43,101; (iii) £50,538; (iv) £71,434; and (v) £82,976 and these are categorised as follows: -

Salary Band £	Number of DOE Staff
37801-43100	114
43101-50537	66
50538-71433	36
71434-82975	3
82976 and above	3
Total	222

Development of Dunadry

Mr D Kinahan asked the Minister of the Environment, further to his statement in the Assembly on 9 November 2009, if he will ensure that developments T/2000/0360; T/2000/0964; and T/2004/1305(o) are precluded from being used as a benchmark for the further development of Dunadry. (AQW 3498/10)

Minister of the Environment: Planning histories are but one of a number of material considerations which are considered by the Department in determining planning permission. Due consideration has also to be paid to current or emerging Policy, in this instance, the recently published Draft Addendum to PPS7 "Safeguarding the Character of Established Residential Areas" will be a consideration. This recent policy document will be considered in conjunction with the policies already contained within PPS7.

Whilst each planning application is assessed on its own individual merits, the planning approvals referred to will remain relevant considerations to the Department in dealing with any future planning applications in Dunadry to ensure that the cumulative impact of development is fully considered.

New Initiatives

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment what new initiatives, measures and practices have been implemented in his Department as a means of assisting the community and achieving improved, efficient decision making during the current economic crisis. (AQW 3507/10)

Minister of the Environment: My Department is working with Executive Colleagues to deliver the range of measures announced in the Assembly on 15 December 2008, designed to protect the people and business of Northern Ireland from the effects of the credit crunch. In connection with this work I sit as Joint Chair on the Cross Sector Advisory Forum (CSAF) subgroup on Infrastructure, Planning and Procurement. The recommendations of the subgroup have been submitted to the First and deputy First Minister who intend to produce a consolidated report on the work of all subgroups for the next meeting of the CSAF.

In addition, DOE has implemented a number of new initiatives, measures and practices as a means of assisting the community and achieving improved, efficient decision making during the current economic crisis. Initiatives have been introduced by the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA), the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and Planning Service, which has undertaken this work as part of short term reform measures aimed at improving efficiencies and helping the economy. Details of these initiatives are as follows:

Improving waiting times

Due to a concerted effort, vehicle and driving test waiting times have gradually fallen over the last year. This gives customers more flexibility when booking tests. In November 2008, the average waiting time for an MOT test was 15 days, compared to 9 days in November 2009. The waiting times for driving tests were 21 days in November 2008 and 17 days in November 2009. On occasions customers have been able to book tests within shorter time spans.

Retaining fees at existing levels

As a Trading Fund, DVA operates on the basis of full cost recovery in relation to vehicle and driver test functions. Fees are reviewed annually and fee increases are proposed when the cost of running the functions exceeds the anticipated income to be generated during the following year. This Agency has in many cases been able to absorb running cost increases through generating greater efficiencies.

On-line booking

The inclusion of the facility to book a vehicle and driving test on-line through NIDirect has increased ease of booking tests for customers. Previously they could book through the DVA website, but NIDirect has added another access channel. On-line booking rates are gradually increasing, and the impact that NIDirect has will be monitored. In Nov 2008 18.96% of tests were booked on-line and this increased to 23.44% in November 2009.

Merger of DVLNI and DVTA, 1 April 2007

Since the merger, a single enquiries unit has been set up to deal with both licensing and testing enquiries. There were previously two dedicated enquiry functions in separate locations, with no contact between them. Customers now have a single point of enquiry, which reduces the time they will spend trying to get information. From 1 April 2008 to 30 November 2009, this unit has dealt with 370,378 calls, and answered 90.5% within 30 seconds. Satisfaction surveys indicate a high level of satisfaction with this service.

Approved Driving Instructors

To enable the driving public to make better and more cost effective decisions when choosing a driving instructor, DVA has carried out an advertising campaign to raise public awareness of the importance of using instructors registered with the Approved Driving Instructor scheme. These instructors are qualified to teach, unlike a number of unregistered instructors that currently operate as driving instructors. Adverts were placed on the backs of buses during November in the Belfast and greater Belfast areas, and a further campaign is planned.

Customer Complaints

DVA has a very small proportion of complaints relative to business volumes, however these are now analysed for trends, and where these are found, this information is fed back to the Agency's policy and strategy section.

Waiting times in Local Vehicle Licensing Offices

A project has been undertaken to look at how waiting times at local licensing offices can be reduced using 'Lean' thinking. Lean is an approach to process management and improvement that involves the staff working on the processes, and ensures a strong customer focus is retained.

Funding for listed buildings

Following the launch of a new Listed Building Grant programme in May 2008, some £3.8m will be spent in the current year to assist with the conservation of listed buildings in Northern Ireland benefiting both the construction industry and owners of listed buildings. In addition, NIEA continues to work with private sector stakeholders, including developers, education bodies and local community groups to give technical advice and guidance on conservation projects.

Better Regulation

Through its Better Regulation Programme, NIEA is focused on delivering a more efficient, streamlined service and reducing the burden on businesses. Current initiatives include:

- Consultation on NIEA Draft Charging policy which proposes to limit fee increases to rate of inflation;
- Development of online application facility - enables businesses to apply and pay for permits online by March 2010;
- NetRegs.gov.uk - provision of free, up to date guidance and new learning tools on regulations and green business practices;
- NIEA is working to reduce the regulatory burdens for well-managed materials through the development of Waste Quality Protocols, in partnership with the Environment Agency and WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme). This should encourage more sustainable re-use of waste materials and in turn reduce waste disposal costs.

Construction and Maintenance

NIEA continues to carry out a programme of capital and maintenance works at its country parks and nature reserves which benefit both the local companies who carry out the work as well as enhancing the experience of our visitors to the sites.

Natural Heritage grants programme

NIEA continues to provide funding of some £3m for projects and initiatives that contribute to the conservation of biodiversity and protection of the landscapes. This is available to environmental Non Government Organisations, community groups and councils.

Strategic Projects

As part of key reform measures to support the economy, two Strategic Projects teams at Planning Service Headquarters were created to specifically handle all large scale investment planning proposals. They also have a specific focus on applications of social or economic significance to Northern Ireland and also facilitate the pre-application discussions (PADs) process which was introduced in December 2007.

This helps to ensure that economically significant applications are processed without undue delay, particularly in the current economic climate, when it is essential that proposals that will bring inward investment are processed to a decision as quickly as possible.

The aim is to front load the planning process by encouraging applicants to engage in constructive pre-application discussions designed to result in a good quality planning application being submitted accompanied by all of the necessary information which will maximise the prospects of getting through the statutory planning process quickly leading to a speedier decision.

Streamlining

A very successful streamlined council consultation scheme has been introduced with the agreement of all 26 Councils which greatly assists the community through the more efficient handling of minor non-contentious planning applications. Approved streamlined application decisions are issued on average within 32 working days, which is particularly beneficial to the economy, particularly in terms of Small to Medium Sized Enterprises (SME), which currently represent about 30% of all applications. Discussions are ongoing with Councils to extend the Scheme.

Six councils are currently operating an extended scheme and it is hoped that with the agreement of all councils, streamlined applications will represent at least 50% of all applications submitted in future.

Good Practice Guide

The Minister launched a Good Practice Guide on 18 June 2009 in partnership with the building industry with the joint aim of improving the efficiency of the planning system and providing greater certainty about timescales. A key objective of the Guide is to raise the quality of applications focusing on the role of all key stakeholders with the overall aim of speeding up the planning process.

Joint Housing Working Group

A Working Group has been established jointly between the Planning Service and the Construction Employers Federation (CEF) with the twin aims of improving efficiencies in the handling of planning applications and raising the quality of housing development. An agreed Housing Action Plan is currently being implemented.

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment what targets his Department set within the Investing for Health strategy; and what progress has been made to date against these targets. (AQW 3519/10)

Minister of the Environment: My Department has 3 targets under Investing for Health objectives 5 and 6.

The target under objective 5, “To improve our neighbourhoods and wider environment” is; “To reduce the levels of respiratory and heart disease by meeting the health-based objectives for the 7 main air pollutants by 2005”. This target is to be achieved in each subsequent year.

Air quality in general is continuing to improve throughout Northern Ireland. The average number of days of moderate or worse air quality across all monitoring sites in Northern Ireland has decreased in the last ten years from 8.3 days in 1999 to 2.8 days in 2008.

Measurements from Northern Ireland’s network of 32 automatic air quality monitoring stations during 2008 and previous years show that the Air Quality Strategy (AQS) Objectives for the following 5 out of the 7 main pollutants have been met by the due dates –

- Carbon Monoxide
- PM10
- Benzene
- 1,3-Butadiene
- Sulphur Dioxide

However, monitoring has identified some areas across Northern Ireland where there have been incidences and Action Plans to improve air quality in these locations are being formulated and implemented by the relevant councils under the provisions of the Environment (NI) Order 2002.

My Department provides funding to District Councils through the Local Air Quality Grant Scheme to assist them with their statutory responsibilities and actions to improve local air quality.

The targets under, objective 6, “To reduce accidental deaths and injuries in the home, workplace, and from collisions on the road” are,

“Target i: To reduce the death rate from accidents in people of all ages by at least one fifth between 2000 and 2010”.

“Target ii: To reduce the rate of serious injuries from accidents in people of all ages by at least one tenth between 2000 and 2010”.

This is a cross cutting target which my Department has contributed to through its road safety and vehicle testing programmes. The number of road deaths in NI fell from a peak of 372 in 1972 to a record low of 107 in 2008. The reduction from the total of 171 in 2000 has been 37%. However, road deaths in 2009, to 17 December, are up 8% on the same period last year. Since 2000, serious injuries on the roads have fallen from 1,786 to 990, a reduction of 45%. Road deaths amongst children fell from 18 in 1999 to seven in 2008, serious injuries from 191 to 94, and slight injuries from 1,746 to 952.

In 2008-09, DVA conducted around 900,000 full vehicle tests and 76,000 practical driving tests.

Dog Fouling

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment how many investigations have been carried out in relation to dog fouling in each local council area, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3550/10)

Minister of the Environment: Information in relation to investigations and warnings by local councils with respect to dog fouling offences is not held by the Department.

Prosecutions for dog fouling offences are relatively rare with district councils more likely to issue fixed penalty notices (£50 fine) to offenders, as an alternative to prosecution by the courts.

The table below provides information on dog fouling cases which were taken to the courts. The first figure relates to the number of cases, the second relates to the number of successful prosecutions.

Financial Year					
Council Area	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Belfast	12/0	18/4	25/7	3/3	9/3
Coleraine	1/1	1/1	0	0	1/1
Craigavon	0	1/1	0	1/1	0
Down	0	1/1	1/1	1/1	0
Larne	0	0	2/1	1/1	1/1
Limavady	0	0	0	1/0	0
Newtownabbey	2/2	1/1	6/4	1/1	0

Dog Fouling

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how many people have been prosecuted for dog fouling offences in each local council area, in each of the last five years; and (ii) how many of these prosecutions have been successful. (AQW 3551/10)

Minister of the Environment: Information in relation to investigations and warnings by local councils with respect to dog fouling offences is not held by the Department.

Prosecutions for dog fouling offences are relatively rare with district councils more likely to issue fixed penalty notices (£50 fine) to offenders, as an alternative to prosecution by the courts.

The table below provides information on dog fouling cases which were taken to the courts. The first figure relates to the number of cases, the second relates to the number of successful prosecutions.

Financial Year					
Council Area	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Belfast	12/0	18/4	25/7	3/3	9/3
Coleraine	1/1	1/1	0	0	1/1
Craigavon	0	1/1	0	1/1	0
Down	0	1/1	1/1	1/1	0
Larne	0	0	2/1	1/1	1/1
Limavady	0	0	0	1/0	0
Newtownabbey	2/2	1/1	6/4	1/1	0

Dog Fouling

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment how many warnings have been issued for dog fouling, in each local council area, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3552/10)

Minister of the Environment: Information in relation to investigations and warnings by local councils with respect to dog fouling offences is not held by the Department.

Prosecutions for dog fouling offences are relatively rare with district councils more likely to issue fixed penalty notices (£50 fine) to offenders, as an alternative to prosecution by the courts.

The table below provides information on dog fouling cases which were taken to the courts. The first figure relates to the number of cases, the second relates to the number of successful prosecutions.

Financial Year					
Council Area	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Belfast	12/0	18/4	25/7	3/3	9/3
Coleraine	1/1	1/1	0	0	1/1
Craigavon	0	1/1	0	1/1	0
Down	0	1/1	1/1	1/1	0
Larne	0	0	2/1	1/1	1/1
Limavady	0	0	0	1/0	0
Newtownabbey	2/2	1/1	6/4	1/1	0

Marine Bill

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment whether the reform of fisheries legislation will be included in the Northern Ireland Marine Bill, as was the case with the UK Marine and Coastal Access Act. (AQW 3554/10)

Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Marine Bill will not contain provisions for reform of fisheries legislation.

Sea fisheries legislation is a matter for the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. I understand that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will review the fisheries enforcement powers contained in the Marine and Coastal Access Act and consider if similar powers are required through a local Fisheries Bill.

Reform of Local Government

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment how the initial investment of £118 million for the Reform of Local Government, as set out in the PricewaterhouseCoopers report, is to be funded. (AQW 3555/10)

Minister of the Environment: Firstly, I am convinced that the initial investment of £118 million funding for Local Government reform is critical to the success of the reform programme. For that reason, I am working closely with the Strategic Leadership Board and other regional implementation structures in developing the arguments for, and the approach to, funding the implementation programme. I have already spoken to Minister Wilson on funding and further discussions will be held.

The PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) economic appraisal identifies a range of funding for both the implementation programme and on-going delivery of services under the new 11-council model. Officials from my Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) are examining a range of funding options. These will form future discussions with Minister Wilson in due course.

Reform of Local Government

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the view of local government finance officers that the predicted transformation costs and benefits of the Reform of Local Government as set out in the PricewaterhouseCoopers report are speculative. (AQW 3556/10)

Minister of the Environment: The Economic Appraisal sets out a strategic direction of travel for Local Government in Northern Ireland. The current set of high-level costs and benefits within the Economic Appraisal will continue to be refined as detailed design work is undertaken. So while the assumptions around costs and benefits are high-level and derived from PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) extensive experiences elsewhere the key question is whether they are reasonable at this stage.

At this stage of the process, I believe that it is reasonable to seek a 7.5% efficiency saving over 5 years from Local Government based on an investment of £118m in additional funding to support and enable change. Therefore, the projected saving of £438m, over 25 years, represents a reasonable base case and provides a firm foundation for the strategic outline business case. Nevertheless, I agree with ALGFO that their queries must be fully addressed during the detailed design phase.

Listed Buildings

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of listed buildings by (i) grade; and (ii) category. (AQW 3557/10)

Minister of the Environment: The number of listed buildings for the end of every Financial Year is published in the Northern Ireland Environmental Statistics Report. The figures recorded for March 2009 are reproduced in the table below. Please note that as this report states: 'Because many listings may include multiple buildings, such as terraces or farm buildings under a single listing reference, the total number of structures is greater than the figure given and is estimated to be around 8,500.'

(i) As requested this information has been subdivided to detail the grades of these buildings as follows:-

Grade A	187
Grade B+	520
Grade B1	3384
Grade B2	2304
Grade B	1785

(ii) We have taken 'category' to mean 'current building use/s', of which there are 129 types on our database. The detailed breakdown of figures is attached as Appendix.

Appendix

Current Buildings Uses = 129 types

There are currently 8306 records which are recorded within the groupings below.

Aircraft Hangar	2
Alms House	0
Alms House - Terrace	0
Arch	6
Archaeological Site	0
Assembly Room	5
Band Stand	4
Bank	120
Bank - Terrace	3
Barracks	17
Bathing House	0
Bee Bole/ House	3
Boat House	6
Boundary Marker	6
Bridge	282
Canal Structure	17

Cannon	1
Castle	2
Church	898
Clock Tower	5
Closet	3
Coastguard House - Terrace	26
Coastguard Station	0
Country House	122
Court House	23
Dove/ Pigeon House	5
Demolished	1
Entertainment Building	6
Estate Related Structures	81
Factory	27
Farm Buildings	27
Fire Station	1
Folly	5
Fort	3
Fountain	29
Gallery/ Museum	29
Gallery/ Museum - Terrace	0
Garden Features	16
Gas Works	5
Gates/ Screens/ Lodges	328
Glass House	7
Graveyard	8
Grotto	1
Hall	149
Harbour/ Pier	12
Health Centre	7
Health Centre - Terrace	1
Hospital Building	36
Hotel	47
Hotel - Terrace	5
House	2893
House - Terrace	1249
Hunting Lodge	1
Hydraulic Ram House	1
Ice House	17
Kelp Store	1

Kennels	2
Library	14
Library - Terrace	1
Light House/ Navigation Mark	10
Market	8
Mass Rock	0
Mausoleum	35
Memorial	116
Milestone	11
Mill	50
Observatory	4
Office	152
Office - Terrace	34
Outbuildings	93
Outdoor Pursuits Centre etc	4
Parliament Building	1
Pavillion	0
Pillar	2
Police Station	8
Port-Cochere	0
Post Box	3
Post Office	24
Post Office - Terrace	1
Power Station	0
Prison	8
Public Baths	2
Public House	96
Public House - Terrace	6
Pump	43
Pump House	3
Railings	1
Railway Station Structures	24
Recreational Club	19
Recreational Club - Terrace	3
Rectories/ Manses etc	70
Religious House	30
Residential Home	17
Residential Home - Terrace	2
Rural Industry	14
School	127

Shop	417
Shop - Terrace	46
Shopping Arcade	2
Soup Kitchen	1
Stables	5
Standing Stone	0
Stocks	1
Store	21
Sundial	3
Sweat House	0
Telephone Exchange	3
Telephone Kiosk	23
Thatched House	3
Toll House	0
Tower	31
Town Hall	22
Tramway Station	0
Tunnel	3
University/ College Building	31
University/ College Building - Terrace 9	
Viaduct	11
Walled Garden Structure	14
Walling	21
Warehouse	14
Watch House	3
Watch Tower	3
Water Trough	0
Water Works Structures	21
Well	7
Well House	2
Windmill	6
Workhouse	2
World War II Structures	3

Listed Buildings

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how many 20th century buildings have been listed in Northern Ireland in each year since 2000; and (ii) to list the address and location of these buildings.

(AQW 3558/10)

Minister of the Environment:

- (i) In total 107 Twentieth Century buildings have been listed in Northern Ireland since 2000, the numbers per year are as follows:-

2000/2001	4
2001/2002	9
2002/2003	8
2003/2004	5
2004/2005	8
2005/2006	12
2006/2007	26
2007/2008	19
2008/2009	16

- (ii) The address and location of these buildings are detailed in the attached Appendix.

Appendix**NI Buildings Database**

20th Century Listings by Financial Year

2000/2001 FINANCIAL YEAR = 4

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB02/10/027	Aircraft Hangar Shackleton Barracks Ballykelly Limavady Co Londonderry	B+	Store
HB02/12/040	Owens Public House 50 Main Street Limavady Co Londonderry BT49 OEU	B2	Public House
HB06/08/015	Bandstand in Town Park Glenarm Road Larne Co Antrim	B1	Band stand
HB06/08/016	Princess Victoria Memorial Chaine Memorial Road Larne Co Antrim	B2	Memorial

2001/2002 FINANCIAL YEAR = 9

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB06/05/049	54 Main Street Ballycarry Larne Co Antrim BT38 9HH	B2	House

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB16/03/024	First Trust Bank 30 Greencastle Street Kilkeel Newry Co Down BT34 4ND	B2	Bank
HB16/07/019 B	Kennels at Leitrim Lodge 121 Leitrim Rd Hilltown Newry Co Down BT34 5XS	B2	Kennels
HB20/15/023	St John's C of I Church Main Street Crumlin Co Antrim	B1	Church
HB20/15/030	Railway viaduct Mill Road Crumlin Co Antrim	B1	Viaduct
HB26/07/009	Administration and drawing office block (Harland & Wolff) Queens Road Belfast BT3 9DV Co Down	B+	Office
HB26/13/006	Cabin Hill Preparatory School Upper Newtownards Road Belfast Co Down BT4 3HS	B2	School
HB26/33/004	St Comgall's Primary School Divis Street Belfast Co Antrim BT12 4AQ	B1	School
HB26/43/025	Former synagogue [now Mater Hospital Physiotherapy Gym] 4 Annesley Street Belfast Co Antrim BT14 6AU	B2	Hospital Building

2002/2003 FINANCIAL YEAR = 8

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB01/25/025	Our Lady of Lourdes RC Church Steelstown Road Londonderry BT48 8EU	B2	Church

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB16/04/049 A	World War II structures To rear of 102 Greencastle Road Kilkeel Newry Co Down BT34 4JP	B1	World War II Structures
HB16/08/050	RUC Station 18A Downpatrick Street Rathfriland Newry Co Down BT34 5DG	B2	Police Station
HB20/14/029	Former Control Tower Langford Lodge Airfield 97 Largy Road Crumlin Co Antrim	A	World War II Structures
HB20/14/031	Hangar no. 6 Langford Lodge 97 Largy Road Crumlin Co Antrim	B1	Aircraft Hangar
HB26/12/051	Little Lea 76 Circular Road Belfast BT4 2GD	B1	House
HB26/43/024	Masonic Lodge 91 Crumlin Road Belfast BT14 6AD	B2	Hall
HB26/50/279	Cathedral Buildings 60-68 Donegall Street Belfast BT1 2GT	B1	Shop

2003/2004 FINANCIAL YEAR = 5

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB05/13/042	Postbox Corner of Rathlin Road & Ann Street Ballycastle Co Antrim	B2	Post Box
HB16/14/044	S of 16 Ardkeeragh Road Donaghmore Newry Co Down BT34 1NW	B2	House
HB18/15/012	Our Lady of the Assumption RC Church, Downs Road, Newcastle, Co. Down BT33 OAG	B1	Church

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB20/06/022	Donegore Footbridge over M2 Motorway Donegore Hill and Loughanmore Road Donegore Co Antrim	B1	Bridge
HB24/04/052 B	'Tir N'an Og' burial ground Mount Stewart Newtownards Co. Down	B1	Graveyard

2004/2005 FINANCIAL YEAR = 8

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB05/14/030 A	Silversprings House 20 Quay Road AKA 20 Silverspring Ballycastle Co Antrim BT54 6ED	B1	House
HB05/14/034	County Primary School 43 Quay Road Ballycastle Co Antrim BT54 6BJ	B2	School
HB16/26/040	Glebe House Windsor Avenue Newry Co Down BT34 1EQ	B2	Rectories/ Manses etc
HB20/09/016	Antrim Railway Station 38 Station Road Antrim Co Antrim BT41 4AE	B2	Railway Station Structures
HB20/14/020	Aircraft Hangar No. 6 R.A.F. Station Crumlin Road Aldergrove Co Antrim	B2	Aircraft Hangar
HB24/06/036	Methodist Church 2 Moat Street Donaghadee Co Down BT21 0DA	B2	Church
HB24/15/038	Maxwell Court, 15 Ballygowan Road, Comber, Co. Down BT23 5PG	B1	House
HB26/50/222	College of Technology College Square East Belfast BT1 6DJ	B+	University/ College Building

2005/2006 FINANCIAL YEAR = 12

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB06/02/001 N	Cottage in Glenarm Castle Estate ('Lord Antrim's Cottage') Great Deer Park Glenarm County Antrim BT44 0BD	B2	House
HB09/14/024 B	Chapel of the Annunciation St Brigid's Convent Convent Road Cookstown Co Tyrone BT80 8QA	B1	Church
HB12/02/054	10 Killard Road Derrygennedy Newtownbutler Co. Fermanagh BT92 8BF	B1	House
HB12/02/074	House Clontivrin Newtownbutler Co. Fermanagh BT92 6FR	B1	House
HB15/02/051	St Paul's Church of Ireland Church Annagora Road Portadown Craigavon Co Armagh	B2	Church
HB16/30/014 B	Chapel at Convent of Mercy (RC) Home Avenue Newry Co Down BT34 2DL	B1	Church
HB19/04/030 A	'H' Block 6 Zone J, The former Maze Prison, Halftown Road Lisburn BT27	B1	Prison
HB19/04/030 D	Multi Denominational Chapel Zone J, The former Maze Prison, Halftown Road Lisburn BT27	B2	Prison

2005/2006 FINANCIAL YEAR = 12

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB19/04/030 E	Concrete Perimeter Walls Zone F and J, The former Maze Prison, Halftown Road Lisburn BT27	B1	Prison

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB19/04/030 F	Cellular Health Care Centre Zone F2, The former Maze Prison, Halftown Road Lisburn BT27	B1	Prison
HB19/04/030 G	Cellular Administration Block Zone F2, Former Maze Prison, Halftown Road Lisburn BT27	B1	Prison
HB25/17/007	Belvoir Park Hospital Hospital Road Belfast BT8 8JP	B2	Hospital Building

2006/2007 FINANCIAL YEAR = 26

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB01/09/002 K	Building Number 85 Officers Mess Ebrington Barracks Limavady Road Londonderry BT47 6HH	B2	Barracks
HB01/09/002 O	Building Number 79 Ebrington Barracks Limavady Road Londonderry BT47 6HH	B2	Barracks
HB03/02/038	Pump outside 139 Carhill Road Swatragh Maghera Co. Londonderry	B2	Pump
HB06/03/033	Fountain Opposite junction of Carncastle and Coast Roads Ballygalley Larne Co. Antrim	B2	Fountain
HB06/03/035	Pump situated opposite 316 Coast Road Ballygalley Larne Co Antrim	B2	Pump
HB08/06/019	Pump 128 Mullaghboy Road Bellaghy Magherafelt Co. Londonderry	B2	Pump
HB08/07/013	Fountain Outside 9 Main Street Tobermore Magherafelt Co Londonderry	B2	Fountain

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB08/10/005 C	Pump at rear of Bridge House 14 Bridge Street Castledawson Magherafelt Co. Londonderry	B1	Pump
HB11/07/033	Fountain outside 104 Main Street Beragh Omagh Co. Tyrone	B2	Fountain
HB11/07/037	Fountain outside 25 Main Street Beragh Omagh Co. Tyrone	B2	Fountain
HB11/20/015	Fountain outside 29 Main Street Sixmilecross Omagh Co. Tyrone	B2	Fountain
HB11/20/016	Fountain outside 46 Main Street Sixmilecross Omagh Co. Tyrone	B2	Fountain
HB11/20/017	Pump outside Weighbridge House Main Street Sixmilecross Omagh Co Tyrone	B2	Pump
HB11/20/018	Pump outside 71 Main Street Sixmilecross Omagh Co Tyrone	B2	Pump
HB16/21/089	Fountain 177 Armagh Road Mullaghglass Bessbrook Co. Armagh	B2	Pump
HB16/21/090	Pump opposite 7 Arch View Terrace The Doctors Hill Mullaghglass Bessbrook Co. Armagh	B1	Pump
HB17/01/049	Pump opposite 10 Park Lane Gilford Co. Down	B2	Pump
HB17/01/054	Pump No. 2 Park Lane Gilford Co. Down	B1	Pump
HB17/03/058	Pump Outside Reformed Presbyterian Church Dublin Road Loughbrickland Banbridge Co. Down	B2	Pump

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB18/08/139	Potato store 11 Castleward Road Strangford Co Down	B2	Store
HB18/08/140	Fountain situated in Quay Lane Strangford Co. Down	B2	Fountain
HB18/08/141	Pump at 12 The Quay Strangford Co Down	B2	Pump
HB18/09/067	Shed at Ardglass Harbour Ardglass Co Down	B2	Store
HB19/01/066	Pump 20 Station Road Ballinderry Lisburn Co. Antrim	B2	Pump
HB24/01/055	42 Shore Road Portaferry Co Down BT22 1JZ	B2	House
HB24/01/163	36 The Square Portaferry Co Down BT22 1LR	B1	House

2007/2008 FINANCIAL YEAR = 19

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB04/15/008 B	Pump outside Byre in farmyard of Leslie Hill Farm Ballypatrick TL Ballymoney Co. Antrim	B2	Pump
HB05/05/017	Pump at 3 Drones Road Armoy Co Antrim	B1	Pump
HB08/02/001 B	William Clark & Sons Ltd Mill Complex (Excluding Old Mill) 6 The Green Kilrea Road Upperlands Maghera County Londonderry BT46 5RY	B1	Factory
HB09/05/022	Pump behind house 32 Killyneedan Road Sandholes Cookstown Co. Tyrone	B1	Pump

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB11/07/035	Pump outside 76 Main Street Beragh Omagh Co. Tyrone	B2	Fountain
HB11/07/036	Fountain outside 32 Main Street Beragh Omagh Co Tyrone	B2	Fountain
HB11/20/014	Fountain Outside 30 Main Street Sixmilecross Omagh Co. Tyrone	B2	Fountain
HB16/02/068	Fountain Silent Valley Annalong Newry Co. Down	B2	Fountain
HB16/02/069	Fountain situated in Silent Valley Annalong Newry Co. Down	B2	Fountain
HB17/01/052	Pump Next to 23 Park Lane Gilford Co. Down	B2	Pump
HB18/08/143	Fountain at the slip Strangford Co Down	B2	Pump
HB18/09/068	Larger shed at Harbour Ardglass Co Down	B1	Store
HB19/23/049	Pump opposite 73 Edenderry Village Edenderry Belast	B2	Pump
HB19/23/050	Pump at junction of Drumbo, Pinehill and Front Roads Drumbo Lisburn	B1	Pump
HB21/04/010 B	Pump No. 2 9 The Village Ballyeaston Larne Co. Antrim	B2	Pump
HB22/03/003	Orient House 142 Upper Road Greenisland Co Antrim BT38 8RL	B2	House
HB22/08/034	Military complex within Carrickfergus Borough Council yard Town hall Joymount Carrickfergus Co Antrim BT38 7DL	B1	Store

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB23/18/058	Glenmakieran 141 Bangor Road Cultra Holywood	B+	House
HB24/17/099	Bradock Island Killinchy Newtownards BT23 6PZ	B1	House

2008/2009 FINANCIAL YEAR = 16

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB09/03/011	Aughlish Bridge Lower Kildress Road Cookstown Co Tyrone	B2	Bridge
HB09/07/021	10 Urbal Road Coagh Cookstown BT80 0DW	B2	House - Terrace
HB09/07/022	12 Urbal Road Coagh Cookstown BT80 0DW	B2	House - Terrace
HB09/07/023	14 Urbal Road Coagh Cookstown BT80 0DW	B2	House - Terrace
HB09/07/024	16 Urbal Road Coagh Cookstown BT80 0DW	B2	House - Terrace
HB09/09/018	15 and 17 Ballyneill Road Ballyronan Magherafelt Co Londonderry BT45 6JL	B2	House
HB09/13/032	Telephone Exchange Molesworth Road Cookstown Co Tyrone BT80 9NR	B2	Telephone Exchange
HB09/14/026	Social Security Office Fairhill Road Cookstown Co Tyrone BT80 8AG	B1	Office
HB16/01/040	Intercepting Weir At grid J3435 2438 Near Annalong Newry Co Down	B2	Water Works Structures
HB16/01/041	Intercepting Weir and Tunnel At Grid J3415 2425 Near Annalong Newry Co Down	B2	Water Works Structures

HB Ref No	Address	Survey 2	Current Use
HB16/01/050	Water Conduit Rourke's Park Head Road Annalong Newry Co Down	B2	Water Works Structures
HB16/01/051	Well House Dunnywater Head Road Annalong Newry Co Down	B2	Water Works Structures
HB16/01/054	Aqueduct Dunnywater Annalong Newry Co Down	B2	Water Works Structures
HB16/01/055	Mixing Wells Dunnywater Annalong Newry Co Down	B2	Water Works Structures
HB16/01/061	Well House Off Head Rd Annalong Newry Co Down BT34 4RJ	B2	Water Works Structures
HB26/50/280	Frames Snooker Hall 2/14 Little Donegall Street Belfast BT1 2JD	B1	Entertainment Building

Review of Public Administration

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the Mid Ulster Transition Committee review which states that the Pricewaterhousecooper Report would not in any way meet the normal standards required of Economic Appraisals by the Department of Finance and Personnel, in so far as most of its assumptions are totally unsubstantiated. (AQW 3592/10)

Minister of the Environment: Firstly, I welcome the comments of the Mid Ulster Transition Committee on the PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) Economic Appraisal and appreciate their continued strong support for the philosophy that underpins the Review of Public Administration.

The Committee has raised a number of interesting points and these, together with those from across local government, were discussed at the recent Strategic Leadership Board meeting held on Wednesday, 9 December 2009. At that meeting, concerns were raised about the lack of confidence across the sector regarding the detail of the costs and efficiencies articulated in the report. Whilst it was recognised that it is not possible to have full details of all the costs and benefits, it was considered imperative that the assumptions and methods used in the report are further examined before the report's key findings and recommendations are approved.

Although these high-level estimates are deemed appropriate for the purposes of the appraisal, detailed business cases will need completed in respect of the individual projects that will underwrite it. I therefore anticipate that the issues raised will be fully addressed as part of the detailed design phase.

Local Government Reform

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the assumptions made in the Pricewaterhousecooper Report in identifying the transition costs. (AQW 3593/10)

Minister of the Environment: PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) took the view that any assumptions being made in relation to either costs or benefits would be based on a prudent approach. Therefore, throughout the appraisal they have taken the higher cost and the lower benefits when considering transition and transformation.

Evidence of this approach is demonstrated within the transition section of the report where PwC calculate the severance scheme for councillors at £5.25 million. This is based on calculating the maximum qualifying period and the highest cost. However, experience, based on Scottish council reform, indicates that only around 60% of those eligible would take up such a scheme. This equates to a cost of £3.15 million.

On the overall assumptions, I am content with the consultants approach. Where budget lines currently exist for the on-going costs relating to RPA functions (e.g. Strategic Leadership Board, Regional Transition Coordination Group, Regional Local Government Reform Joint Forum) these should not be included within the appraisal. This is also the case with Northern Ireland Local Government Association who have a reform role and have secured addition funding through my Department.

Local Government Reform

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment what action he proposes to take to eliminate the inequity which will result from the differing, existing district rates and liabilities of the constituent councils. (AQW 3595/10)

Minister of the Environment: There is a role for my Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel to undertake some work to examine the potential impact on ratepayers within amalgamating councils and to explore the potential for measures to avoid significant rises in both domestic and non-domestic district rates as a result of this amalgamation.

I consider the issue of the convergence of rates to be critical to the success of the local government reform programme and I will be addressing this with the Finance Minister, the rest of the Executive and with District Councils over the coming months.

DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Government Office Accommodation

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail by parliamentary constituency the location of (i) existing; and (ii) proposed public sector and government office accommodation, including (a) the employing public authority or Government Department; and (b) the amount of office square footage in each location. (AQW 3016/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): The information requested has been placed in the Library.

Government Office Accommodation

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to list the location of public sector and Government office accommodation occupied by senior civil service grades in each parliamentary constituency, identifying the public authority or Government Department in each instance. (AQW 3120/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The information requested is provided in the attached table.

Building Name	Address	Postcode	Constituency Area (if known)	Number of Senior Civil Servants	Associated Dept or NDPB
DSD Owned/leased Buildings					
Great Northern Tower	Great Victoria Street Belfast	BT2 7BN	Belfast South	1	DSD
Housing Centre	2 Adelaide Street Belfast	BT2 8PB	Belfast South	6	NIHE
DE Owned/Leased Buildings					
Forestview	Purdys Lane Saintfield Road	BT8 7AR	Belfast South	1	DE
OFMDFM Owned/Leased Buildings					
Temporary building on site of Crumlin Road Gaol	53-55 Crumlin Road	BT14 6ST	Belfast North	1	OFMDFM
DARD Owned/Leased Buildings					
CAFRE Greenmount Campus	22 Greenmount Road, Tirgracey Road Muckamore Antrim	BT41 4PU	South Antrim	1	DARD
AFBI Stormont	Stoney Road Belfast	BT4 3SD	Belfast East	1	AFBI
AFBI Newforge	18 Newforge Lane Belfast	BT9 5PX	Belfast South	3	AFBI
AFBI Crossnacreevy	50 Houston Road, Crossnacreevy, Belfast	BT6 9SH	Strangford	1	AFBI
DCAL Owned/Leased Buildings					
PRONI	66 Balmoral Avenue Belfast	BT9 6NY	Belfast South	1	DCAL
MacNeice House	77 Malone Road Belfast	BT9 6AQ	Belfast South	1	Arts Council NI
House of Sport	Upper Malone Road Belfast	BT9 5LA	Belfast South	1	Sport NI
Ulster Folk and Transport Museum	153 Bangor Road Cultra Hollywood	BT18 0EU	North Down	2	National Museum NI
NI Assembly					
Parliament Buildings	Stormont Estate Belfast	BT4 3LR	Belfast East	4	OFMDFM
DFP Owned/Leased Buildings					
Dundonald House	Stormont Estate Belfast	BT4 3Sb	Belfast East	19	DARD
Castle Buildings & Annexes	Stormont Estate Belfast	BT4 3SX	Belfast East	8 23	OFMDFM DHSSPS
N/A	83 Ladas Drive Belfast	BT6 9FR	Belfast East	1	HESNI
Rathgael House	43 Balloo Road Bangor	BT19 7NA	North Down	5 9	DE DFP

Building Name	Address	Postcode	Constituency Area (if known)	Number of Senior Civil Servants	Associated Dept or NDPB
Rathgael House Old	43 Balloo Road Bangor	BT19 7NA	North Down	12 3	DE DFP
Calvert House	23 Castle Place Belfast	BT1 1FY	Belfast West	3	DOE
Oxford House	49-53 Chichester Street Belfast	BT1 4HH	Belfast South	1	DFP
Hydebank	4 Hospital Road Belfast	BT8 8JL	Belfast South	1	DARD (Rivers Agency)
Netherleigh	1 Massey Avenue Belfast	BT4 2JP	Belfast East	9	DETI
Centre House	79 Chichester Street Belfast	BT1 4JE	Belfast South	1	DFP
Clarence Court	10-18 Adelaide Street Belfast	BT2 8GB	Belfast South	4 15	DOE DRD
Royston/Ferguson House	13 Wellington Place Belfast Floors 4, 5, 6 & 7	BT1 6GB	Belfast South	1 4	DHSSPS DFP
Queen's Court	56-66 Upper Queen's Street Belfast	BT1 6FD	Belfast South	4	DFP
Lancashire House	5 Linenhall Street Belfast	BT2 8AA	Belfast South	2	DRD
Bankmore House	62-66 Bedford Street Belfast	BT2 7FH	Belfast South	1	DFP
Longbridge House	12-24 Waring Street Belfast	BT1 2EB	Belfast North	1	DFP
Waterman House	5 Hill Street Belfast	BT1 2LA	Belfast North	1	DOE
Victoria Hall	12 May Street Belfast	BT1 2NL	Belfast North	5	DFP
Lincoln Building	25-45 Great Victoria Street Belfast	BT2 7SL	Belfast South	2	DFP
Craigantlet Buildings	Stormont Estate Belfast	BT4 3SX	Belfast East	1	DFP
Stormont Castle	Stormont Estate Belfast	BT4 3TA	Belfast East	8	OFMDFM
N/A	Road Transport Licensing Division 148-158 Corporation Street Belfast	BT1 3DH	Belfast North	1	DOE
Adelaide House	39-49 Adelaide Street Belfast	BT2 8FD	Belfast South	10	DEL
McAuley House	2-14 Castle Street Belfast	BT1 1SA	Belfast South	1	DFP
Avenue House	42-44 Rosemary Street Belfast	BT1 2QT	Belfast West	1	DHSSPS
Lesley House	25-27 Wellington Place Belfast	BT1 6GQ	Belfast South	1	DSD
Millenium House	1st(pt), 2nd & 3rd(pt) Floors 17-25 Great Victoria Street Belfast	BT2 7BN	Belfast South	4	DOE

Building Name	Address	Postcode	Constituency Area (if known)	Number of Senior Civil Servants	Associated Dept or NDPB
Causeway Exchange	1-9 Bedford Street Belfast	BT2 7EG	Belfast South	6 1	DCAL DFP
Goodwood House	44-58 May Street Belfast	BT1 4NN	Belfast South	1	DOE
Clare House	303 Airport Road West Belfast	BT3 9ED	Belfast East	8	DFP
Waterfront Plaza	1st floor 8 Laganbank Road Belfast	BT1 8LX	Belfast South	1	DETI
Lighthouse	1 Cromac Place Gasworks Business Park Belfast	BT7 2JB	Belfast South	11	DSD
James House	2-4 Cromac Avenue Gasworks Business Park Belfast	BT7 2JA	Belfast South	5	DSD
Colby House	Stranmillis Court Belfast	BT9 5BJ	Belfast South	2	DFP
Klondyke Building	Cromac Avenue Belfast	BT7 2JA	Belfast South	3	DOE
Knockview Buildings	Blocks 1-5 Stormont Estate Belfast	BT1 6ED	Belfast East	1	OFMDFM
Orchard House	40 Foyle Street Londonderry	BT48 6AT	Foyle	1	DSD
N/A	39 Abbey Street Armagh	BT61 7EB	Newry & Armagh	1	OFMDFM

Civil Servants' Earnings

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of senior civil servants in each pay grade; and (ii) the total salary costs for each senior civil service pay grade in each of the last three financial years. (AQW 3159/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The total salary including bonuses of senior civil servants in each pay band in the last three financial years is set out in the table below. For reasons of data protection the salary of the Head of the Civil Service (HOCS) has been included in the pay band 3 figures.

Financial Year	Pay band	No. of Staff	Total salary (gross + bonus) £
2006/07	Pay band 1	176	11,952,444
	Pay band 2	42	3,880,903
	Pay band 3 + HOCS	13	1,576,725
2007/08	Pay band 1	173	11,803,089
	Pay band 2	43	4,054,539
	Pay band 3+ HOCS	14	1,747,164
2008/09	Pay band 1	167	11,510,821
	Pay band 2	42	4,053,541
	Pay band 3 +HOCS	14	1,752,049

Retired Civil Servants

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many (i) Administrative Assistants; (ii) Administrative Officers; and (iii) EO2s retired from the Civil Service between 1 January 2003 and 31 August 2008. (AQW 3257/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of Administrative Assistants, Administrative Officers and EO2s who retired from the Civil Service between 1 January 2003 and 31 August 2008 is set out in the table below.

Period 1 January 2003 - 31 August 2008	Administrative Assistant	Administrative Officer	EO2
Retirees	235	425	267

Pleural Plaques

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline a timetable for the introduction of legislation on pleural plaques and compensation for sufferers. (AQW 3276/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: A consultation exercise on pleural plaques closed on 12 January and since then officials have analysed the submissions made and monitored developments in Great Britain. On 7 October officials met with the Committee for Finance and Personnel and discussed the draft analysis and proposals on the way forward. Policy recommendations are being considered by officials and I hope to be able to place policy recommendations before the Executive Committee early in the New Year.

Local Government Reform

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) for his assessment of the recent PriceWaterhouseCoopers report and the suggestion that rate-payers in Fermanagh will be expected to pay a 20% increase; and (ii) for his assessment of the fairness of this levy on rate-payers in the region. (AQW 3420/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: My understanding is that the initial economic appraisal in relation to the local government reforms is still being considered and it has not yet been formally submitted to DFP for approval. I therefore would not want to give my assessment of the report until this process is complete. What I would say, though, is that the projected district rates currently contained in the PWC economic appraisal are incomplete and do not represent an accurate portrayal of what actual rates will be following the move to eleven councils.

It needs to be borne in mind that the District Rate accounts for less than half of a typical household rate bill and the impact of changes to the regional rate need to be factored in. Furthermore, there are a wide range of other variables which will impact on the outcome, including the extent and method of funding of the transferring functions and the efficiency savings that will emerge in the coming years from reducing the number of councils.

I have said publically that this Executive will not preside over a local government reform process which leads to rate increases of the scale suggested in the PWC report and this remains the position.

Local Government Reform

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) if the proposed eleven council model goes ahead, what effect the Reform of Local Government will have on the rates levied throughout the existing local councils; (ii) which of the existing councils would be subject to (a) lower household rates; and (b) increased household rates, under the proposed eleven council model. (AQW 3421/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: My understanding is that the initial economic appraisal in relation to the local government reforms is still being considered and it has not yet been formally submitted to DFP for approval. I therefore would not want to give my assessment of the report until this process is complete. What I would say, though, is that the projected district rates currently contained in the PWC economic appraisal are incomplete and do not represent an accurate portrayal of what actual rates will be following the move to eleven councils.

It needs to be borne in mind that the District Rate accounts for less than half of a typical household rate bill and the impact of changes to the regional rate need to be factored in. Furthermore, there are a wide range of other variables which will impact on the outcome, including the extent and method of funding of the transferring functions and the efficiency savings that will emerge in the coming years from reducing the number of councils.

I have said publically that this Executive will not preside over a local government reform process which leads to rate increases of the scale suggested in the PWC report and this remains the position.

Economic Crisis

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what new initiatives, measures and practices have been implemented by his Department as a means of assisting the community, and achieving improved, efficient decision-making during the current economic crisis. (AQW 3500/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: To protect the people and business of Northern Ireland from the effects of the credit crunch, the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced in the NI Assembly on 15 December 2008 a range of measures which should sustain Northern Ireland's economy over the coming months and years while confidence returns to the global credit market and economic prospects improve.

My department has taken forward a number of these measures including:

- A regional rate freeze currently applies in both the domestic and non-domestic sectors (for the 2009/10 rating year);
- A Small Business Rate Relief Scheme, to be introduced in April 2010;
- An examination of ways to maximise opportunities for small contracting firms to bid for contracts;
- Social and economic sustainability requirements are included in all new construction contracts where the procurement commenced since December 2008; and
- The introduction of a new 10 day prompt payment policy across all departments.

In addition, my department has pro actively managed the resources available to the Executive in order to facilitate many of the actions taken by other departments. This includes the payment to low income households following the increase in energy costs as well as the record level of investment in capital projects last year which has provided significant support to the construction sector.

Currently one of the key objectives of the ongoing Review of 2010-11 spending plans is to fund the further deferral of domestic water charges which will avoid the potential additional burden on household bills next year.

My department is also supporting the work of the Cross Sector Advisory Forum (CSAF) which was established to review and bring forward recommendations for addressing problems arising from the economic crisis.

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what targets his Department set within the Investing for Health strategy; and what progress has been made to date against these targets. (AQW 3508/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department of Finance and Personnel has no direct targets as a result of the Investing for Health strategy but undertakes actions in a number of areas in support of the strategy.

In advising Ministers on public expenditure and financial issues, DFP incorporates information on a variety of issues including for example the New TSN social and/or health implications.

The Occupational Health Service (OHS) continues to be at the forefront of developing and helping to deliver innovative approaches which promote health in the workplace setting. For example, the OHS has delivered the Lifestyle and Physical Activity Assessment programme to over 10,000 civil servants. In addition, a new NICS Mental Wellbeing at Work Charter was published in 2009.

The NICS People Strategy 2009-13 includes as a key component, employee health, wellbeing and engagement, which affords the NICS further opportunity to take action to invest in the health of its workforce.

Key developments in the Northern Ireland Building Regulations since 2005 have included improvements to fire safety standards, revised energy performance, air supply standards and extended the application of requirements on accessibility to buildings.

Civil Service Back Pay

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of the dissatisfaction among some civil servants regarding HR Connect's administration of Pay Roll, what safeguards are being put in place to ensure that the payment of civil service back pay is seamless and without unnecessary delay. (AQW 3511/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Following discussions with NIPSA, a proposal for settlement of all the equal pay claims has been put to the Trade Union Side. In the event that this is accepted, a number of arrangements will be needed to facilitate implementation.

I have instructed my officials to ensure that the necessary arrangements and appropriate safeguards are in place, including those concerning the role HRConnect might play.

HRConnect service reports have shown that the service is now providing a very accurate payroll service.

2008-2011 Budget

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if the 2008-2011 Budget agreed by the Executive included the circa £700 million in 3% efficiency savings faced over the three year budget period by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. (AQW 3512/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: As part of the Budget 2008-11 process, the Executive agreed that all Northern Ireland departments would be required to deliver 3% per annum cash releasing efficiency savings over the three year period.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was set the same % target as other departments which implies that £695 million of savings are to be achieved by DHSSPS over the years, 2008-09 to 2010-11.

The resources released from these efficiency savings were allocated to departments within the Budget 2008-11 process to improve public services.

Special EU Programmes Body

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what monitoring and evaluation his Department is undertaking, or intends to undertake, of the Special EU Programmes Body allocation of Peace III funding. (AQW 3528/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: DFP as Northern Ireland sponsor department for the Special EU Programmes Body has extensive formal mechanisms in place to monitor progress and performance of all aspects of the PEACE III Programme including allocations made in line with departmental, NSMC and EU requirements.

Full reports on the PEACE III Programme performance are provided to the North South Ministerial Council in its Special EU Programmes sectoral format. DFP examines these reports in detail and agrees their contents. In line with NSMC procedures these papers are circulated to the Executive, and following the meeting I make a statement to the Assembly.

In line with EU regulations full progress reports on the PEACE III Programme are provided to the Programme Monitoring Committee, which includes DFP and meets at least twice per year. This involves monitoring and reporting against agreed performance indicators including in terms of the key horizontal principles, environment and equality. The first major Programme evaluation, Implementation Analysis of PEACE III and INTERREG IVA Programmes, was carried out in 2009 and is available on the website of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). It includes analysis of the geographical spread of projects and coverage of target areas and groups.

DFP also monitors Programme implementation through its membership of all Programme steering committees that are responsible for the selection of projects.

Energy Performance Certificates

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what measures have been taken since May 2007 to ensure that all properties when sold or rented have a valid Energy Performance Certificate. (AQW 3553/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Prior to, and since the making of, The Energy Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) Regulations (NI) 2008, the Department adopted a compliance-based enforcement regime based on best practice advice from Trading Standards. This included:

- Radio and television interviews by Minister and officials;
- Press releases;
- A series of seminars to property professionals, solicitors and members of the public;
- Advertisements in all local newspapers;
- Advertisements and editorials in professional publications;
- Creation of a dedicated website (www.epb.dfpni.gov.uk) from which the public can get additional information and download a number of guidance booklets;
- Distribution of posters and leaflets;
- Letters and information visits to Northern Ireland estate and letting agents;
- Compliance checks on randomly selected marketed properties in Estate/Letting Agents across Northern Ireland; and
- Most recently transferring the enforcement role to district councils.

Civil Servants' Earnings

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many civil servants in his Department receive an annual salary (i) between £37,801-£43,100; (ii) between £43,101-50,537; (iii) between £50,538-71,433; (iv) between £71,434-82,975; and (v) above £82,976. (AQW 3563/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The information requested is set out in the table below.

Annual Salary	Number of Civil Servants
£37,801-£43,100	210
£43,101-£50,537	62
£50,538-£71,433	97
£71,434-£82,975	8
Above £ 82,976	14
Total Civil Servants	391

Equal Pay

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if an estimate has been made of the number of staff, in those civil service grades covered by the November equal pay claim offer, who left the service between 1 February 2003 and 31 July 2008. (AQW 3569/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of staff at Administrative Assistant, Administrative Officer and Executive Officer 2 (and analogous) who left the NICS between 1 February 2003 and 31 July 2008, are set out in the table below. These staff are not covered by the proposal to settle the NICS Equal Pay claims.

Grade	Staff Numbers
Administrative Assistant	5426
Administrative Officer	2650
Executive Officer 2	684

Equity Release Scheme

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he would consider an equity release scheme to realise additional funding from the Treasury set against the value of Executive assets. (AQW 3582/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: This proposal was raised informally with the Treasury when it was first suggested in December 2008. The Treasury indicated then that such a scheme would not be acceptable to them.

Such a scheme would give rise to concerns regarding the cost to the UK Exchequer, the implied transfer of risk, the value for money position at the UK level as well as implications for Whitehall departments and the other Devolved Administrations.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

In-Patient Cases of Listeria

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many in-patient contracted cases of Listeria have occurred in each hospital; and (ii) how many of these cases proved fatal, in each of the last three years. (AQW 3363/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information is not available on (i) the number of in-patient contracted cases of Listeria that have occurred in each hospital; and (ii) the number of these cases that have proved fatal, in each of the last three years.

Health and Social Care Trust

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if any current Chief Executive or Director of a Health and Social Care Trust has ever been suspended or faced disciplinary proceedings; and if so, to provide details. (AQW 3365/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No current Chief Executive or Director of any of the Health and Social Care Trusts has ever been suspended or faced disciplinary proceedings.

Clerical Abuse

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action the Executive is taking to ensure that safeguards are in place to prevent any recurrence of clerical abuse. (AQW 3388/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My officials have had some preliminary discussions with representatives of the National Safeguarding Board for Children within the Catholic Church about their recent proposal to explore with the relevant government departments and statutory authorities, a mechanism by which to ensure that the Catholic Church's current policies and practices in relation to the safeguarding of children represent best practice and that all allegations of abuse are properly handled. We wish to establish if this approach has the potential to provide us with independent reassurance about how children are now protected within the Catholic Church.

My officials are also preparing a paper for the Executive setting out options for dealing with the issue of historical abuse within Northern Ireland.

In addition, the introduction of the new Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups legislation, which supersedes the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults legislation, introduces tougher safeguarding arrangements to help meet Government's commitment to increasing public protection by significantly extending the range of activities and workplaces from which individuals may be barred from working with children and vulnerable adults. Consequently, many more individuals than at present who may pose a risk to children can be removed from the workplace. These arrangements extend to clergy within the Roman Catholic Church.

My Department will be bringing forward legislation next year to establish a regional, independently-chaired Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland. The Board will ultimately replace the non-statutory Area Child

Protection Committees and will have a duty to make arrangements to safeguard the welfare of children and young people. There will be a duty for relevant agencies to make arrangements to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and to co-operate to improve the well being of children.

The current statutory framework in Northern Ireland requires that where allegations of child abuse come to light these must be reported immediately to PSNI and Social Services for investigation. I would strongly encourage anyone who has any information regarding any allegations of child abuse to report these immediately to the statutory authorities for investigation so that perpetrators can be brought before the courts where this is appropriate.

Clerical Abuse

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action the Executive is taking to assist the victims of clerical abuse. (AQW 3389/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Current arrangements are that victims can consult their GP who can then make an appropriate referral for treatment and/or counselling. Victims can also contact social services for advice, counselling and support. Voluntary organisations such as the NEXUS Institute which deals confidentially with those who have suffered sexual abuse can also be contacted.

The Roman Catholic Church has made arrangements with an organisation “FAOISEAMH” which was set up and funded by the Conference of Religious of Ireland (CORI) to listen to and arrange face-to-face counselling for victims of abuse by members of religious orders. “Faoiseamh” is a completely private and confidential service. I would recommend that victims of clerical abuse, including those who were abused in Northern Ireland, should contact the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church who will be able to advise them as to the support available to them through Faoiseamh and through the Church in general.

The current statutory framework in Northern Ireland requires that where allegations of child abuse come to light these must be reported immediately to PSNI and Social Services for investigation. I would strongly encourage anyone who has any information regarding any allegations of child abuse to report these immediately to the statutory authorities for investigation so that perpetrators can be brought before the courts where this is appropriate.

Emergency Calls

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for each month of the last three years, the percentage of emergency calls answered (i) in urban areas; and (ii) in rural areas, within the 8 minute target for life threatening calls, in the Western Local Commissioning Group area. (AQW 3393/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) does not separately monitor its performance against the 8 minute target for life-threatening calls in rural and urban areas.

Cardiac Patients

Ms A Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if it is normal practice for doctors of cardiac patients, who do not require immediate surgery, to keep them in the Belfast City Hospital for six weeks in order for them to be fast tracked for surgery in the Royal Victoria Hospital; and what is the daily cost of such a patient occupying a bed in Belfast City Hospital. (AQW 3398/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Standard practice is that only patients who have been referred for cardiac surgery and are assessed as ‘urgent’ cases will be required to stay in hospital until their surgery is complete. The waiting time target between referral and surgery for these patients is 28 days. Unfortunately, current figures [as at 14th Dec 2009] have shown that five patients have had to wait longer than 28 days. However, the Belfast Trust is working to ensure all patients are dealt with within the timescales set and in accordance with their clinical priority. As patients in these circumstances must remain in hospital for clinical reasons, the cost of their care while awaiting surgery must be met by the Trust.

Community Care Arrangements

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients with mental health issues have had their discharge date delayed for more than four weeks due to complications with community care arrangements, broken down by (i) health board; and (ii) the discharging healthcare institution, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3403/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of patients with mental health issues that have had their discharge date delayed for more than four weeks due to complications with community care arrangements can only be provided for the last 2 years & Health & Social Care Trust.

The following table includes the number of inpatients with a mental health diagnosis resident in an acute hospital that had their discharge date delayed for more than four weeks due to complications with community care arrangements, broken down by the HSC Trust of the discharging healthcare institution.

	No. of inpatients with a mental health diagnosis resident in an acute hospital that had their discharge date delayed for more than four weeks due to complications with community care arrangements	
	2007/08	2008/09
Belfast HSC Trust	41	30
Northern HSC Trust	55	7
Southern HSC Trust	6	4
South Eastern HSC Trust	44	17
Western HSC Trust	16	16
Northern Ireland	162	74

Source: Admissions & Discharges Universe

Patient Discharges

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, for each Health and Social Care Trust area and healthcare institution, (i) the number of patients discharged from mental health units who have been re-admitted within 28 days; (ii) the rates of re-admission as a percentage of all discharges for patients aged (a) under 18; (b) 18-44; (c) 45-65; and (d) over 65. (AQW 3405/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is held on a variety of systems, not currently accessible centrally.

People who are Deafblind

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many people are currently registered as deafblind; (ii) what proportion of these people have had their individual needs assessed by sensory support services; and (iii) whether any waiting list exists for such assessments. (AQW 3406/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on persons registered as deafblind, assessments by sensory support services, and waits for these assessments is not collected centrally.

Home-Care Packages

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (i) the home-care packages available through Health and Social Care Trusts; and (ii) the criteria involved in deciding how these packages are allocated. (AQW 3407/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The level and type of home care packages available is dependent on the assessed needs of each individual service user, with the service tailored to meet those needs.

Services range from help with domestic tasks at home to intensive personal care to night sitting. Home care services should, where possible, be rehabilitative in nature, enabling people to help themselves, maintain existing skills and develop appropriate new ones.

In May 2008, my Department issued Access Criteria for Domiciliary Care. Following assessment of need, HSC Trusts are required to consider those needs against 4 defined bandings: critical, severe, moderate and low. Services are then allocated according to the level of risk a service user's needs present both to the service user and to their carers and family.

Nursing Care in the Community

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many private companies are contracted by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust to provide nursing care in the community; and to detail the locations in which these companies currently operate. (AQW 3409/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Southern Trust does not use agencies or any other private companies to provide nursing care by a registered nurse into the patient's own home.

C-difficile

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if in the last three years, any patients not suffering from C-difficile, or recovering after having had C-difficile, have been kept in specialist C-difficile wards; and if so, in which hospitals. (AQW 3410/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the member to the answer I gave to AQW 2906/10.

Dermatology Treatment

Mr G Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the average waiting time for patients referred to the Causeway Hospital for urgent dermatology treatment; and (ii) the number of people currently on the waiting list for dermatology treatment at the Causeway Hospital. (AQW 3414/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the waiting time for a first outpatient appointment is collected by specialty and the length of time that a patient is waiting in time bands. The median waiting time band for patients referred to the Causeway Hospital for a first outpatient appointment in the Dermatology specialty, at the 30th September 2009, was 0-6 weeks. The number of people on the waiting list for a first outpatient appointment in the Dermatology specialty at the Causeway Hospital¹ at the 30th September 2009 was 306.

(Source: Departmental Return CH3)

1. Data relates to patients waiting for a first outpatient appointment in the Dermatology specialty at the former Causeway HSS Trust

Altnagelvin Hospital

Mr G Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) what is the annual running cost of the coal-fired boiler in the new wing at Altnagelvin Hospital; and (ii) what would the estimated running cost be if a switch was made to natural gas. (AQW 3415/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The existing coal fired boiler at Altnagelvin Hospital provides heating for the new south wing, at an annual cost of £133,000. An equivalent amount of natural gas, required to heat the new south wing of Altnagelvin Hospital, would cost £183,000 per year.

Carbon Reduction Commitments

Mr G Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the estimated cost to (i) Antrim Hospital; and (ii) Altnagelvin Hospital of carbon reduction commitments from April 2010. (AQW 3416/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The first year of the Carbon Reduction Commitment Energy Efficiency Scheme (CRC) is 2010/2011 and no purchases of allowances for emissions of CO₂ will be required in this year. In April 2011, Antrim Hospital will be required to purchase allowances based on the CO₂ emissions in 2010/2011. The Northern Trust has estimated that the cost to Antrim Hospital in 2011/2012 for purchasing these allowances will be around £89,000. This figure is estimated using 2008/09 data.

The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has confirmed that they will be using the advisory reports associated with display energy certificates for Antrim Hospital to target further energy efficiency measures as a means of reducing the potential costs of CRC allowances.

Altnagelvin Hospital is excluded from the CRC as they are already participating in the European Union Emissions Trading Scheme (EU ETS).

Termination of Pregnancy

Rt Hon J Donaldson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps his Department is taking in response to the High Court judgement which ruled that certain aspects of the guidelines on the termination of pregnancy are unlawful. (AQW 3423/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The High Court did not quash the guidance. The High Court found that two aspects, namely the sections on Counselling and Conscientious Objection failed to give “fully clear and accurate guidance”. On these two issues alone the High Court has ordered the removal of the guidance with a view to the guidance being reconsidered by my Department.

I am currently giving careful consideration to the two adverse findings.

NI-ADD

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the support provided by NI-ADD to the parents of children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. (AQW 3454/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: NI ADD provides a Parenting Programme, a specially designed 10 week programme to meet the complex needs of families affected by AD/HD. The organisation also provides an Individual Counselling Service provided within a caring and supportive environment for adults experiencing difficulties relating to the impact of AD/HD.

A wide range of support and information is also provided to parents of children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder through their Telephone Helpline, Advocacy service, Information service, Monthly Support Meetings and Library service.

NI-ADD

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what funding is available to NI-ADD to ensure that there is adequate provision to support children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and their families. (AQW 3455/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department currently provides the Northern Ireland Attention Deficit Disorder Support Centre with £25,000 per year towards its central administrative expenditure. The balance of its income should come from selling its services. It is for NI-ADD to promote its services to Health and Social Care Trusts and enter into formal contracts with them for the delivery of its services.

All-Ireland Protection for Children

Mrs C Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps his Department has taken since the debate on the Ryan report motion on 2 November 2009, with specific reference to the establishment of a working group to ascertain the extent of the abuse, the provision of funding for a support helpline and counselling services, and ensuring that all-Ireland protection for children is put in place as soon as possible. (AQW 3457/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As you are aware the Executive have asked me to assume the role of lead Minister in relation to any implications for the Executive of issues arising from the Ryan Report. My Department is currently exploring what mechanism might be used to inform any assessment of the level of abuse which may have occurred in Northern Ireland. I have also written to other Departments asking for their views on how the issue of historical abuse in Northern Ireland might be taken forward and I am currently awaiting responses from a number of key departments. Once all relevant information is available to me for consideration I will be in a position to bring detailed proposals forward to the Executive, in the New Year. My officials have begun drafting a paper for the Executive based on the information which is already known to them. Any decision on the way forward will be for the Executive as a whole.

Current arrangements are that victims can consult their GP who can then make an appropriate referral for treatment and/or counselling. Victims can also contact social services for advice, counselling and support. Voluntary organisations such as the NEXUS Institute which deals confidentially with those who have suffered sexual abuse can also be contacted.

Under the auspices of the North South Ministerial Council we are working in partnership with our counterparts in the Irish Republic to strengthen child protection. This includes, for example, current work to developing and implementing joint guidance setting out steps should be taken when a child at risk of harm moves between the two jurisdictions.

Prader-Willi Syndrome

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of our meeting of 24 November 2008, what action he has taken to address the issue of provision of homes for people diagnosed with Prader-Willi syndrome; and if this issue can be addressed from within existing resources. (AQW 3465/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My policy is to provide the range of help and support necessary to allow those with conditions such as Prader - Willi Syndrome (PWS) to remain in their own community and to live as independent a life as possible. In that context, an individual with a diagnosis of PWS has access to the full range of services available and those services are based on a person centred assessment of need and are provided by specialist staff within multi-disciplinary teams to meet each individual's needs.

Services are provided from within the overall funding available for Learning Disability Services. I have made Learning Disability Services an area of priority and I fought hard to secure an additional £33m within the current CSR period.

Health and Social Care Trusts' Spending

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the expenditure per capita of each Health and Social Care Trust in each of the last five years. (AQW 3469/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Expenditure per capita of each HSC Trust is not available for the five years requested. Information prior to 2007/2008 would not be meaningful as the legacy Trusts were a mix of Acute, Community or both and as such did not relate to geographic area.

Doctor On Call Services

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the expenditure on 'doctor on call' services by each Health and Social Care Trust, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3470/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the member to AQW 1957/10, AQW 2615/09 & AQW 1532/08.

Private Health Care Referrals

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of referrals made to the private sector by each Health and Social Care Trust in each of the last five years. (AQW 3471/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is only available from the beginning of 2007/08.

The number of patients that received either (i) a first outpatient appointment or (ii) inpatient treatment in the independent sector, following a referral from each Health and Social Care Trust, in the financial years 2007/08 and 2008/09, is contained in the table below.

HSC Trust	Number of patients that attended a first outpatient appointment		Number of patients receiving inpatient treatment	
	2007/08	2008/09	2007/08	2008/09
Belfast	4,603	8,544	3,379	4,037
Northern	5,054	8,539	902	1,828
Southern	1,515	3,210	1,676	3,171
South Eastern	4,893	10,051	1,810	2,890
Western	4,761	8,509	2,660	5,086

Source: HSC Trusts

Note: These figures may contain an element of multiple counting. For example, one patient may have received a first outpatient appointment, and then subsequent inpatient treatment, in the independent sector during this period.

The requirement placed on Trusts to deliver against waiting times targets remains as does the option of engaging with the independent sector to help address any shortfalls in health service capacity which are identified.

Supplementing health service capacity through use of the independent sector is an appropriate short-term measure which will help reduce waiting times to a level at which they can be stabilised and maintained. I expect that, when that position is achieved, independent sector capacity will be sought only in exceptional circumstances.

Western Health and Social Care Trust Posts

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the total number; (ii) the location; and (iii) the grade of posts within the Western Health and Social Care Trust which are located in (a) the Omagh district; and (b) the Strabane district; and to detail any other posts within the West Tyrone constituency which are linked to an agency or agencies within his Department's remit. (AQW 3473/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the tables below.

(A) WESTERN TRUST FACILITIES IN OMAGH LGD AT 30TH SEPTEMBER 2009

Tyrone County	Carrickmore Health Centre
Tyrone & Fermanagh	Dromore Health Clinic
Omagh Centre Deverney Rd	Strathroy Psychiatric Hostel
Gortin Centre	Camowen Hill Bungalow
Gortmore House Day Centre	Rivendell House, Omagh
Riverside Family Centre	Lissan House, Omagh
The Bridge Centre Omagh	Bridge House, Omagh
Gortmore Old People Home	Beltany House
Coneywarren Childrens Home	Deverney House

Woodlands Childrens Home	Erne House, Omagh
Omagh Health Centre	Woodlands

NUMBER OF STAFF IN POST WITHIN WESTERN HSC TRUST FACILITIES IN OMAGH LGD AT 30TH SEPTEMBER 2009

Staff Group	Headcount	WTE
Administration & Clerical	377	338.4
Estates Services	51	50.5
Support Services	224	166.3
Nursing & Midwifery	682	618.3
Social Services	261	237.6
Professional & Technical	191	165.2
Medical & Dental	50	45.8
Total	1836	1622.1

Source: Human Resource Management System

(b) Western Trust facilities in Strabane LGD at 30th September 2009

- Strabane Day Centre
- Greenfield Home for the Elderley
- Donemana Health Clinic
- Castlederg Health Clinic
- Strabane County Buildings
- Glenside S.C.S., Derry Road
- Strabane Community Mental Health Team, Railway Street
- Newtownstewart Health Clinic

NUMBER OF STAFF IN POST WITHIN WESTERN HSC TRUST FACILITIES IN STRABANE LGD AT 30TH SEPTEMBER

Staff Group	Headcount	WTE
Administration & Clerical	13	11.0
Support Services	22	12.4
Nursing & Midwifery / Professional & Technical	17	14.8
Social Services	62	55.6
Total	114	93.8

Source: Human Resource Management System

Notes:

1. WTE = whole-time equivalent.
2. LGD = Local Government District
3. Staff figures exclude bank staff and staff with a whole-time equivalent less than or equal to 0.03.

In addition, the Public Health Agency has 7.5 whole-time equivalent staff employed in facilities within Omagh and Strabane LGDs.

HIV

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department has carried out a structured investigation into the rise in the number of HIV cases; and what is the Department's strategy to address this issue. (AQW 3475/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On behalf of my Department, the Public Health Agency, in collaboration with the Health Protection Agency, routinely monitors the incidence and prevalence of HIV in Northern Ireland.

My Department's Sexual Health Promotion Strategy and Action Plan 2008-2013 sets the strategic context to improve, protect and promote the sexual health of our population. The Strategy aims to effect a reduction in the number of all STI diagnoses including HIV. Planned action to address issues around HIV includes raising public awareness with a particular focus on those most at risk and preventative initiatives including community based programmes and outreach programmes. The Action Plan also includes the consideration of local research needs to help inform the approach to allow appropriate preventative activities targeted at those most in need.

Accident and Emergency Departments

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients who attended the Accident and Emergency department in (i) Antrim Area Hospital; (ii) Whiteabbey Hospital; and (iii) the Mid Ulster Hospital, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3482/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of patients who attended the Accident and Emergency department in (i) Antrim Area Hospital; (ii) Whiteabbey Hospital; and (iii) the Mid Ulster Hospital, in each of the last five years, are published each year in the annual 'Hospital Statistics' publication. These publications can be found at the following link: http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-activity_stats-2/hospital_statistics.htm.

Accident and Emergency Departments

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (i) consultants; (ii) registrars; (iii) senior house officers; and (iv) nurses currently employed in the Accident and Emergency departments in (a) Antrim Area Hospital; (b) Whiteabbey Hospital; and (c) the Mid Ulster Hospital. (AQW 3484/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the table below.

PERMANENT STAFF IN ACCIDENT & EMERGENCY DEPARTMENTS AT DECEMBER 2009

	Antrim Area Hospital		Whiteabbey Hospital		Mid Ulster Hospital	
	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE
Consultants	4	4.0	0	0	0	0
Registrars/ Associate Specialist/ Staff Grade	13	13.0	4	3.9	0	0
Senior House Officers	5	5.0	0	0	0	0
Qualified Nurses	69	57.8	10	8.2	13	11.6

Source: Northern Health & Social Care Trust

Notes:

- Figures include permanent staff only. Bank staff and locums are excluded.

Attention-deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Ms A Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what facilities are provided to children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and their families by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 3485/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: ADHD is diagnosed at an early age and children suspected of having ADHD are in the first instance referred to Child Development Clinics for diagnosis. Services

for children with ADHD are provided by community paediatric clinics and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.

NI-ADD

Ms A Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the service it has provided through Trust referrals in the past, what support the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust will be giving NI-ADD. (AQW 3486/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I understand that you already have had a full reply directly from Belfast Trust, but I can confirm that the Trust is not in a position to contract with NI-ADD at this time, as all voluntary budgets are allocated and it is not envisaged that they will be able to incur further expenditure in the present financial year.

However, with regard to future commissioning of services, Belfast Trust will consider NI-ADD within the Trust's service planning arrangements for 2010/11.

Civil Servants' Earnings

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 2908/10, to detail (i) the job titles; (ii) pay scale; and (iii) the total amount earned by the civil servants in question. (AQW 3496/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is set out in the table below:

Job Title	Number	Pay Scale 2008-09 £	Total Amount Earned 2008-09 £
Permanent Secretary	1	98,059 – 205,000	115 – 120k
Deputy Secretary	4	81,600 – 160,000	420 – 425k
Deputy Chief Medical Officer	1	57,300 – 116,000	85 – 90k
Chief Pharmaceutical Officer	1	57,300 – 116,000	90 – 95k
Chief Nursing Officer	1	57,300 – 116,000	90 – 95k
Senior Medical Officer	4	57,300 – 116,000	335 – 340k
Assistant Secretary	3	57,300 – 116,000	250 – 255k

Economic Crisis

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what new initiatives, measures and practices have been implemented by his Department as a means of assisting the community and achieving improved, efficient decision-making during the current economic crisis. (AQW 3530/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department's particular role is to cope with the consequences of the crisis for the mental and physical wellbeing of the population. As such, reduced prices for prescriptions this year and the move to free prescriptions next year will help alleviate the effects of the economic downturn on the population. My Department will sustain access to a full range of services for the population to support continued improvements in health and wellbeing. The approach taken to efficiency targets has been to protect staffing in general, and front-line staffing in particular.

My Department also continues to move ahead with just under £680m of planned investment within the current CSR period to address issues such as modernising the health and social care system and NI Fire and Rescue Service infrastructure.

Neuromuscular Services

Mrs C Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will commission a review of neuromuscular services. (AQW 3532/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A Review of Adult Neurology Services in Northern Ireland was completed in November 2000 and its findings published in May 2002.

I have recently commissioned the Health and Social Care Board, as regional commissioner of services in NI, to undertake a full and comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of the recommendations contained in that review and report its findings to me next year.

In parallel with this process, my officials are reviewing the continued relevance of the Review recommendations in light of any professional or other guidance which has issued since their publication. This work will inform my Department as to the need for further development of neurology services in Northern Ireland.

Muscular Dystrophy

Mrs C Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to ensure that vulnerable patients with muscular dystrophy have access to Health Service funded muscular dystrophy care advisers. (AQW 3533/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In line with the recommendations of the 2009 Walton Report, a business case for the funding of a Muscular Dystrophy NI Care Advisor post has been completed and is currently being considered by the Health and Social Care Board. The post will lead on service development and provide advice and support for people with Muscular Dystrophy in Northern Ireland.

Knockbracken Healthcare Park: Dorothy Gardner and Rathlin Wards

Mrs N Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the Dorothy Gardner and Rathlin wards at Knockbracken are to be amalgamated; and for his assessment of the impact on patient care. (AQW 3534/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Trust has more beds than is required and is merging the Dorothy Gardiner and Rathlin admission wards on the Knockbracken site to Rathlin Villa. Rathlin will have two wings, one male and one female. The Dorothy Gardner Villa will become the rehabilitation ward for the Trust. The Trust is confident this will bring a vast improvement in the quality of accommodation for patients who may spend lengthy periods of time in hospital. The reduction in acute beds and enhancement of community mental health services is in line with Bamford recommendations.

Belfast Trust, met recently with a wider group of concerned carers and former patients and, having listened to their concerns, has decided to take another look at its plans to merge the Dorothy Gardiner male villa and the Rathlin female villa.

Representations have also been made to the Trust encouraging the continuation of Rathlin villa as a female only ward and the Trust has agreed to consider if reconfiguration of acute provision could accommodate this suggestion.

Windsor House

Mrs N Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the reasons for the rejection of the proposal to close Windsor House. (AQW 3535/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust's Board did approve the proposal to close Windsor House, however, it took the view that the unit should not close until building commenced on the new inpatient unit. Consultation on the proposed location for the new inpatient unit is currently underway.

Knockbracken Healthcare Site

Mrs N Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures are planned to mitigate the loss of the 'singing kettle' facility on the Knockbracken Healthcare site. (AQW 3536/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Belfast Trust has confirmed that the Singing Kettle Café is not closing. The Trust has been in negotiation with New Horizons to continue the Singing Kettle's function. This service will be focused on aspects of recovery such as training and work experience.

First Responder Scheme

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (i) how a First Responder scheme would be established; (ii) the criteria for recruiting volunteers as First Responder; and (iii) if the NI Ambulance Service would be the training providers for volunteers to a First Responder scheme. (AQW 3538/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) provides advice on establishing First Responder schemes on its website at www.niamb.co.uk/docs/our_services_first_response.html#1stresp4.

Agenda for Change

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has not engaged with level 5 band nurses who wish to have their banding reassessed under Agenda for Change. (AQW 3540/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is not clear from the member's question the clinical area or the location of Band 5 nursing staff to which he is referring. The South Eastern HSC Trust employs over 1,400 band 5 nurses in a range of specialties so it is difficult to be specific in my response. However, there is a clear process for the implementation of the Agenda for Change pay and grading system that has been developed in partnership with Trade Unions. I have been assured that the South Eastern HSC has adhered to this partnership process throughout.

Agenda for Change

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has not engaged with level 5 band nurses who are seeking information on how to achieve band 6 status under Agenda for Change. (AQW 3541/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is not clear from the member's question the clinical area or the location of Band 5 nursing staff to which he is referring. However, the grade assigned to a job is determined by the responsibilities that that particular job carries. It is not in any one's interest to allow a job evaluation process, that is primarily intended to deliver on equal pay, to be manipulated in such a way that individuals are told how they can increase their grading beyond that which is deemed to be fair and achieved through a systematic process.

Nurses in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why band 5 nurses in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust are currently training recently employed band 6 nurses. (AQW 3542/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Training newly recruited staff this is a matter for individual HSC employers to address. However, it is not unusual for more experienced staff members to advise new starts on housekeeping matters but this does not mean that the clinical skills for which individuals are recruited should in any way be questioned.

Toxocariasis Infections

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients have been treated for toxocariasis infections in each of the last five years. (AQW 3548/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of patients treated for toxicariasis infections in each of the last five years is not available.

Civil Servants' Earnings

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many civil servants in his Department receive an annual salary (i) between £37,801-£43,100; (ii) between £43,101-50,537; (iii) between £50,538-71,433; (iv) between £71,434-82,975; and (v) above £82,976. (AQW 3560/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is set out in the table below:

Salary Range	Number of Civil Servants
£37,801 - £43,100	76
£43,101 - £50,537	30
£50,538 - £71,433	43
£71,434 - £82,975	9
Above £82,976	8

Review of Public Administration

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the redundancies made to date at each management level, under the Review of Public Administration, in each Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 3565/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A total of 512 applications have been approved for Review of Public Administration related voluntary redundancies and voluntary early retirements on the grounds of redundancy in Health and Social Care Trusts. The number in each Trust at each level at 8 December 2009 is set out below; this process is continuing.

HSC Trust	Level 1 (Chief Executive)	Level 2 (Director)	Level 3 (Deputy/Assistant Director)	Level 4 & below (Below Assistant Director)
Belfast HSC Trust	3	16	58	89
Northern HSC Trust		8	22	85
Southern HSC Trust	3	10	6	77
South Eastern HSC Trust		6	15	31
Western HSC Trust		5	11	67

External Consultants

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many former DHSSPS staff are currently employed by his Department as external consultants. (AQW 3566/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This Department does not currently employ any former DHSSPS staff as external consultants.

Swine Flu

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for a detailed breakdown of the cost to his Department of swine flu. (AQW 3567/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In September officials forecasted that Swine Flu would cost the Department £64.6m. This forecast, known as scenario 1, was based on a low level of virus spread. It is now predicted that costs emerging under scenario 1 conditions will be in the region of £61.6m. The reduced requirements resulting from this changing need have been returned to DFP.

Forecast Costs of Swine Flu	September Monitoring £m	December Monitoring £m
Antivirals	9.0	9.0
Antibiotics/Medicines	0.9	0.9
PPE/Consumables	6.4	5.3
Vaccine Purchase	14.8	14.1
Surge Planning- Hospitals/Community Services	11.8	13.6
Surge Capacity- Primary Care	3.4	3.7
Critical Care Equipment	4.3	4.5
Vaccination Programme	3.5	2.1
Other Surge Costs	1.7	1.3
Communications	1.5	1.4
Storage/Distribution	4.7	2.8
National Pandemic Flu Service	2.6	3.0
Total Forecast Expenditure 2009/10	64.6	61.6

Based on current scientific evidence, UK wide decisions have been taken to extend the vaccination programme to include children over 6 months and under 5 years; further consideration is also being given to proposals to vaccinate carers. My Department has supplied information to DFP as part of the December monitoring round on funding required for these areas. These initiatives are outside the scope of the plans and required budget of £64.6m previously agreed by the Executive.

I will be in a position to confirm planned total expenditure subsequent to the Executive's consideration of December monitoring bids.

Hospital Hygiene

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action has been taken following the recent Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority report on hospital hygiene. (AQW 3568/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have set up a new team comprising senior staff from the Department and the Public Health Agency to ensure that there are rigorous arrangements in place to drive up hygiene and cleanliness across all health facilities.

I have asked Chief Executives and senior officials in the Trusts to walk the wards at least every month to check cleanliness and hygiene levels.

I have commissioned a toolkit for ward staff to monitor the state of hospital wards, and I have commissioned additional support and advice for domestic cleaning staff.

I have also commissioned a 'back to basics' pilot scheme to ensure more effective cleaning of wards – equipment and surfaces that are regularly touched such as door handles will be cleaned even more frequently.

Parkinson's Disease

Ms M Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he is aware of the Parkinson's Disease Society's 'Get it on time' campaign; and whether he has considered issuing a directive, or implementing other measures, to ensure that people with Parkinson's Disease who are in hospitals and care homes always get their medication on time. (AQW 3576/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am aware of the Parkinson's Disease Society, "Get it on Time" campaign and that they have produced a set of resources to support the campaign for its use in hospitals and care homes.

Following a meeting with members of the Parkinsons Disease Society in 2007, the Chief Nursing Officer gave his support to the "Get it on time Campaign," and requested the Royal College of Nursing(RCN) to work in partnership with the Parkinsons Disease Society (PDS) to raise the awareness of the needs of people with Parkinsons Disease within the Nursing Profession.

Northern Ireland has been cited as a "success story" in a recent article on the Parkinson's Disease Society website which describes the high number of nurses participating in workshops organized jointly by the RCN and the PDS to raise awareness of the needs of people with Parkinson's in Hospitals and Care Homes.

Parkinson's Disease Specialist Nurses of which there are 6 in Northern Ireland regularly provide awareness sessions for staff in HSC Trusts and Care Home settings.

Trusts encourage patients to bring their own medication into hospital and systems are in place in many areas which promote self medication where appropriate.

Re-Banding of Grade 5 Nurses

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why there has been no resolution to the re-banding of grade 5 nurses to grade 6 following discussions which were initiated four years ago, and after an appeal was lodged one year ago. (AQW 3584/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern HSC Trust employs over 1,400 band 5 nurses in a range of specialties, 249 of these staff have submitted review requests following their Agenda for Change grading and these are at different stages within the review process. The Trust maintains regular contact with Trade Unions in this continuing process and staff will be notified of their review outcome when the process is complete.

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how and when the dispute concerning banding of nurses within the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust will be resolved and what meetings are planned to facilitate this. (AQW 3585/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I understand that a formal grievance has been lodged by district nursing staff in the South Eastern HSC Trust and this will be heard in early January 2010. It is therefore not appropriate for the Trust to facilitate further meetings to discuss this issue until the grievance process has been exhausted.

DEPARTMENT FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Pumping Station, Portadown

Mr D Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development what public consultation was carried out prior to the erection of the pumping station at the junction of the Gilford Road and Russwood Park, Portadown. (AQW 3375/10)

Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that its proposals for Gilford Road Sewage Pumping Station were presented to Craigavon Borough Council in February 2008 and to local residents and public representatives at a site meeting in March 2008.

In addition, as part of the normal planning process, Planning Service consulted with local residents and statutory bodies likely to be affected by the proposed works. Following receipt of planning approval for the Pumping Station in October 2008, NIW provided local residents with general construction information and contact details to enable residents to discuss any concerns about the works.

Pumping Station, Portadown.

Mr D Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development whether NI Water notified the residents of Russwood Park that the dimensions of the kiosk erected at the pumping station at the junction of the Gilford Road and Russwood Park, Portadown, were different to those on the original plans. (AQW 3381/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that if it had sought an amendment to the original planning application for Gilford Road Sewage Pumping Station, Planning Service would have consulted with local residents as part of the normal planning process. Regrettably, because NIW failed to do so, residents in the area were not advised that the dimensions of the control kiosk had been changed.

NIW has now consulted with public representatives and local residents and is currently reviewing the design of the control kiosk with a view to retrospectively submitting an amended planning application to Planning Service for consideration.

Bicycle Parking Bays

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development how many bicycle parking bays for public sector workers are provided in each parliamentary constituency. (AQW 3396/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I should advise the Member that the majority of office accommodation used by my Department's staff is within buildings that are owned and managed by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). These buildings are often shared with other departments.

The table below provides details of the number of bicycle parking bays available for my Department's staff. In addition, although they are not designated bicycle parking bays, areas within Roads Service depots are made available for bicycle parking by staff:-

Building Name	Address	Postcode	Constituency Area (if known)	No of bicycle parking bays
Roads Service	Section Offices and Depots throughout the North		N/A	21
DFP Owned/Leased Buildings Occupied by DRD Staff				
County Hall	5 Mountjoy Road, Omagh	BT79 7AF	West Tyrone	10
Marlborough House	2 Central Way, Craigavon	BT64 1AD	Upper Bann	6
Rathkeltair House	87 Market Street, Downpatrick	BT30 6AJ	South Down	5
Hydebank	4 Hospital Road, Belfast	BT8 8JL	Belfast South	18
Clarence Court	10-18 Adelaide Street, Belfast	BT2 8GB	Belfast South	10
County Hall	7 Castlerock Road, Coleraine	BT51 3HS	East Londonderry	20

Economic Crisis

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development what new initiatives, measures and practices have been implemented in his Department as a means of assisting the community and achieving improved, efficient decision making during the current economic crisis. (AQW 3504/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The Executive announced, in the Assembly on 15 December 2008, a range of measures which should sustain our economy over the coming months and years while confidence returns to the global credit market and economic prospects improve.

This included the allocation by the Executive of an additional £4.3m to my Department to address the impact of the economic downturn in 2008-09. Translink identified several projects that could be completed before the end of March and its £1.8m additional allocation was used to:

- improve bus stations and depots;
- buy and erect fencing; and
- improve sea defences on the railways network.

The additional funding also allowed Roads Service to allocate £2.5m for resurfacing work. Local contractors carried out much of this work and it was completed before 31 March 2009.

As the largest capital Department, DRD has also continued to progress significant capital and maintenance programmes across Roads, Transport and Water which support local contractors and the local economy.

In addition, my Department has assisted the community by playing its part in waiving domestic water charges for 2009-10 and introducing the extension of free travel on bus and rail services to people aged 60-64.

As part of the December package, the First Minister and deputy First Minister also established a Cross Sector Advisory Forum (CSAF) to continue our dialogue with business, trade unions and voluntary and community stakeholders.

The CSAF is an informal and ad hoc advisory group which meets to review the local impact of the current economic downturn on local people and businesses. The purpose of the group shall be to make recommendations for addressing problems arising from the economic crisis.

Together with the Minister for the Environment, I jointly chaired the Infrastructure Planning and Procurement Sub Group of the CSAF. A number of key issues were considered by the Sub Group to be important in addressing the economic downturn. These have been included in the final report with recommendations and have been submitted to the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Since December 2008 my Department has committed to paying invoices within 10 days following checking and approval.

Central Procurement Directorate in DFP is currently considering the inclusion of additional conditions in its supplies and services contracts in relation to fair payment to ensure that main contractors pass on the benefits of prompt payment to their subcontractors. Any additional conditions in this respect will be mirrored in contracts entered into by the Department and its related public bodies.

In addition, the Department has developed and improved Corporate Governance arrangements to ensure that I am provided promptly with all the information I need to make timely and effective decisions on economic and financial issues.

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development what targets his Department set within the Investing for Health strategy; and what progress has been made to date against these targets. (AQW 3520/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department did not set any specific targets within the Investing for Health Strategy. However, we identified a range of actions which would help to meet the strategy's two goals and seven objectives. Actions included the development and implementation of the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) and the Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS); extension of the concessionary fares scheme; the development of rural community transport programmes; the development of walking and cycling schemes and infrastructure; measures to reduce road traffic collisions; the improvement of drinking water quality; improved compliance with wastewater treatment works discharge standards; and the provision of some form of assistance to households without mains water supply to help improve the quality of their private supplies.

Considerable progress has been made in the last seven years on all these areas. The RDS and RTS are currently under review. Key objectives of the revised RDS include the reduction of carbon emissions by reducing reliance on the car and taking actions to reduce our carbon footprint and facilitate adaption to climate change by increasing the use of renewable energies and sustainable management of waste. The RTS will have a series of

strategic outcomes including the reduction of greenhouse gases and other environmental impacts. The review of the RTS will also have an outcome to achieve a safer transportation network. Policy measures will help to achieve a reduction in the number of killed or seriously injured on our roads.

In addition, Roads Service is very active in addressing road safety concerns, especially around schools, and continues to develop and implement initiatives to further reduce the number of children involved in accidents at all locations. DRD (Roads Service and Travelwise NI) works closely with the Department of Education and other Departments on the Safer Routes to School (SRS) Programme. The Programme seeks to make the school journeys safer and more sustainable through a range of road engineering measures outside schools, so that drivers are made aware of the presence of children.

A key element of the RTS is to encourage more people to walk and cycle as part of the normal travel plans. Roads Service continues to build new cycle lanes and footways as part of its annual improvement programme in support of cycling and walking. Roads Service assists district councils in the signing of Highway to Health projects to encourage people to enjoy the health benefits of walking and facilitates the signing of sections of rural walking routes that are either on or cross public roads. Over the last 10 years, the Department has been actively involved with Sustrans on the development and signing of a national cycle network in the North.

An objective in Investing for Health is tackling poverty and social exclusion. The Accessible Transport Strategy is being implemented to reduce or eliminate the barriers faced by people with disabilities and older people in accessing transport. The latest draft action plan for 2009-2012 has recently completed public consultation and is due to be finalised by the Executive by the end of the year.

The Department has commissioned research as part of the Bamford implementation plan, on the transport needs of those with a learning or mental health difficulty. This will contribute to the objective to promote mental health and emotional well being.

The Department also operates a number of transport related schemes aimed at helping reduce social exclusion. These schemes include the Concessionary Fares Scheme, The Transport Programme for People with Disabilities and the Rural Transport Fund.

On 9 November 2009 I announced the introduction of two new rural transport schemes. These are Dial-a-Lift and the Assisted Rural Transport Scheme. These schemes have been developed to provide transport opportunities to rural dwellers and to reduce social exclusion.

Compliance with drinking water quality standards is calculated by calendar year. In 2006 the level of compliance achieved was 99.34%. The level of compliance in 2008, the most recent year for which complete figures are available, was 99.49%. The target for compliance for 2009 is 99.7%.

Compliance with waste water treatment works discharge standards has increased steadily in recent years. In 2008-09 the water industry achieved compliance levels of 90.24% of population equivalent for NIEA Water Order Consent standards at waste water treatment works serving a population equivalent greater than 250.

My Department is currently reviewing the policy on the provision of financial assistance to properties that are not served by a water main. The first stage of this review involved an assessment of the mains water provision for all domestic properties in the North. This revealed around 4,000 which might not be served by a water main. Questionnaires were issued to these households. Analysis of the responses indicated around 1,200 properties which might not be served by mains water – about 300 of which expressed an interest in being connected. The next stage of the review will be the developing of policy options, including estimating approximate costs and funding requirements, and the drafting of a policy proposal that might effectively tackle this issue for Executive consideration and public consultation. Responsibility for private water supplies rests with DOE.

Hospital Appointments

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions his Department has had with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety regarding the provision of transport for people attending hospital for appointments. (AQW 3549/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department met with officials from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) in February 2009. At that meeting my officials explained the role of the Rural Transport Fund and the Department's support for Rural Community Transport Partnerships. They pointed out that the Partnerships may be in a position to help deliver non emergency transport services, for

people in rural areas, to attend hospital appointments but that this could only be done if funding from DHSSPS was made available.

Officials from DHSSPS agreed to consider the matter and respond to DRD and I understand that a further meeting has been arranged.

As a separate matter, the Partnerships continue to provide transport to their members wishing to visit GP surgeries, dentists, health centres, pharmacies and so on.

NI Water

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the progress being made by NI Water in improving its procurement regulations and procedures. (AQW 3596/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it is a recognised Centre of Procurement Excellence and is continually improving its procurement procedures. It is also a key contributor to the Procurement Task Group, set up by the Minister for Finance and Personnel in conjunction with the Construction Industry Forum NI, to develop practical procurement solutions that will :-

- further develop the partnership between Government and the construction industry;
- facilitate the delivery of projects to the market place as quickly as possible;
- deliver best value for money projects that meet the sustainability objectives set out in the Programme for Government; and
- provide wider stakeholders with confidence that the procurement process is modern, robust and fair.

NIW continues to develop a long-term capital works procurement strategy which will involve the use of an Alliance Framework and will be fully in line with procurement best practice. This approach will provide a number of benefits including capital savings and efficiencies and opportunities for the local construction industry.

Spreading Mixtures Used on Roads

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the different types of spreading mixtures being used on roads during the current cold weather; (ii) where they are sourced; (iii) the chemical composition of the various types of spreading mixture; (iv) the cost; and (v) the relative effectiveness of the different compositions of mixture. (AQW 3651/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it uses rock salt to facilitate the de-icing of the North's roads, during the Winter Service programme.

The rock salt used, which is sourced from mines in Carrickfergus, Co Antrim, has a chemical purity of a minimum 90% Sodium chloride, and is not mixed with any other compound prior to spreading.

The rock salt used was procured under tender, and therefore, its cost is commercially sensitive information.

When the rock salt used by Roads Service is spread on a reasonably heavy trafficked road, it is effective as a de-icer, until sustained temperatures fall below minus 10 degrees Celsius.

DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Private Sector Housing Grants

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how much money is currently owed to contractors for private sector housing grants work already carried out; (ii) how many individual grants this represents; and (iii) how much of this is more than 6 weeks old, broken down by each grants office. (AQW 3146/10)

Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie): The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive generally makes payments to the applicant and cannot pay contractors unless the applicant has assigned the payments directly to the contractor. The table below details how much money is currently owed

to applicants, contractors and FOLD/Gable for private sector housing grants work already carried out and also how many individual grants this represents broken down by Housing Executive grants office. In relation to (iii) the Housing Executive aims to make 90% of all grants payments within 6 weeks of a request and no monies are currently owed for more than six weeks.

Grants Office	Total Payments Being Processed		Payments to Applicants		Payments to Contractors		Payments to FOLD/Gable	
	No.	Value	No.	Value	No.	Value	No.	Value
Ballyclare	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ballymena	3	£17,082.41	1	£4,597.84	2	£12,484.57	0	0
Belfast	29	£154,490.94	19	£94,082.31	6	£35,388.29	4	£25,020.34
Craigavon	14	£121,509.00	8	£50,612.00	4	£36,462.00	2	£34,435.00
Derry	31	£168,255.67	13	£88,115.61	18	£80,140.06	0	0
Dundonald	41	£256,683.97	22	£56,763.95	10	£132,573.09	9	£67,346.93
Fermanagh	31	£193,966.89	23	£102,633.20	8	£91,333.69	0	0
Lisburn	3	£30,500.00	0	0	2	£17,000.00	1	£13,500.00
Newry	26	£256,151.00	13	£115,819.00	12	£112,332.00	1	£28,000
Omagh	55	£279,365.17	33	£136,506.52	22	£142,858.65	0	0
HMO East	9	£72,520.29	9	£72,520.29	0	0	0	0
HMO West	2	£42,700.00	2	£42,700.00	0	0	0	0

Modernisation Fund

Ms M Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the Modernisation Fund, including if, and when, it will re-open for bids. (AQW 3161/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Modernisation Fund (Revenue) Programme has been completed and a total of £2 million was allocated to 18 groups.

To date £2.9 million has been spent from the Modernisation Fund (Capital) Programme and a further £12 million will be allocated by March 2011. This was a hugely oversubscribed, successful scheme with £196 million worth of projects, 475 in total, applying to a Fund of £15 million.

The Modernisation Fund will only be re-opened if new funding becomes available.

Social Housing

Ms C Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of applicants deemed to be in housing stress, currently on the social housing waiting list for North Belfast broken down by (i) Housing Executive common land lord area; (ii) the religion of the applicants; (iii) the gender of the applicants; (iv) dependant status of the applicants; (v) age of the applicants; and (vi) disability status of the applicants. (AQW 3220/10)

Minister for Social Development: The five tables attached provide the information requested in relation to applicants in housing stress who are on the social housing waiting for North Belfast. In relation to (iv) for the purposes of the dependant status of applicants, I have assumed that this means household type. In relation to (vi) the information is not available in the format requested. The Housing Executive does not collate information regarding applicants with a disability other than where it pertains to the housing needs of the applicant. From the latest information available there are no disabled applicants in housing stress currently on the social housing waiting list in North Belfast.

TABLE 1 - APPLICANTS IN HOUSING STRESS ON THE SOCIAL HOUSING WAITING LIST AT 31 MARCH 2009 (LATEST INFORMATION AVAILABLE)

North Belfast	Applicants in Housing Stress
Alliance	10
Ardoyne	158
Ballysillan	76
Carlisle/New Lodge	172
Cavehill	199
Cliftondene	8
Cliftonville	177
Duncairn Gardens	25
Fairhill	18
Gainsborough	25
Glandore & Dunmore	8
Grove Area	25
Lower Ligoniel/Glenbank	16
Lower Oldpark	10
M/S Flats - Carlisle	19
Mount Vernon Estate	16
Newington/Limestone	19
Oldpark	83
Rosewood/Crumlin RDA	<5*
Ross House Flats/Mountvernon Flats	5
Shore Road	46
Skegoneill/Ashfield/Fortwilliam	61
Somerton Rd (Sheltered)	34
Sunningale	22
Torrens	34
Unity Flats	27
Upper & Lower Duncairn	17
Upper Ligoniel	80
Westland	7
Wheatfield	5
Whitewell/Lower Whitewell Rd. / Fairyknowe	72
Whitewell/White City	8
Total	1482

Note:

- * Where there are less than 5 applicants these are not identified for Data protection purposes and to prevent identification of the individual applicant
- Table 2 - Applicants in housing stress on the social housing waiting list by religion at 31 March 2009 (latest information available)

North Belfast Common Landlord Area	Catholic	Other	Protestant	Unknown	Total
Carlisle/New Lodge	140	7	<5	23	170*
Duncairn Gardens	15	<5	<5	<5	15*
Fairhill	0	<5	13	<5	13*
Gainsborough	0	<5	16	6	22*
Glandore & Dunmore	<5	<5	0	<5	0*
Grove Area	0	<5	16	8	24*
M/S Flats - Carlisle	13	0	0	6	19
Mount Vernon Estate	0	0	12	<5	12*
Newington/Limestone	16	<5	0	<5	16*
Ross House Flats/Mou	0	0	<5	<5	0*
Shore Road	0	<5	34	10	44*
Skegoneill/Ashfield/	12	10	30	9	61
Somerton Rd (Shelter	6	<5	16	11	33*
Unity Flats	22	0	<5	<5	22*
Upper & Lower Duncairn	0	0	11	6	17
Whitewell/Lower Whitew	51	5	<5	15	71*
Whitewell/White City	<5	0	7	0	7*
Alliance	<5	0	6	<5	6*
Ardoyne	136	7	<5	12	155*
Ballysillan	<5	5	56	13	74*
Cavehill	145	11	6	37	199
Cliftondene	<5	<5	<5	<5	0*
Cliftonville	131	8	8	30	177
Lower Ligoniel/Glenbryn	<5	<5	11	<5	11*
Lower Oldpark	<5	0	6	<5	6*
Oldpark	55	<5	<5	23	78*
Rosewood/Crumlin	0	0	0	<5	0*
Sunningale	0	<5	19	<5	19*
Torrens	24	<5	<5	5	29*
Upper Ligoniel	69	<5	0	7	76*
Westland	0	0	6	<5	6*
Wheatfield	0	0	<5	<5	0*

Note:

* Where there are less than 5 applicants these are not identified for Data protection purposes and to prevent identification of the individual applicant.

TABLE 3 – APPLICANTS IN HOUSING STRESS ON THE NORTH BELFAST SOCIAL HOUSING WAITING LIST BY GENDER AT 31 MARCH 2009 (LATEST INFORMATION AVAILABLE)

North Belfast	Gender		Total
	F	M	
Alliance	5	5	10
Ardoyne	93	65	158
Ballysillan	41	35	76
Carlisle/New Lodge	91	81	172
Cavehill	103	96	199
Cliftondene	5	<5	5*
Cliftonville	91	86	177
Duncairn Gardens	10	15	25
Fairhill	16	<5	16*
Gainsborough	14	11	25
Glandore & Dunmore	5	<5	5*
Grove Area	18	7	25
Lower Ligoniel/Glenbank	12	<5	12*
Lower Oldpark	<5	9	9*
M/S Flats - Carlisle	<5	15	15*
Mount Vernon Estate	7	9	16
Newington/Limestone	16	<5	16*
Oldpark	49	34	83
Rosewood/Crumlin RDA	<5	0	0*
Ross House Flats/Mountvernon Flats	<5	<5	0*
Shore Road	16	30	46
Skegoneill/Ashfield/Fortwilliam	30	31	61
Somerton Rd (Sheltered)	24	10	34
Sunningale	18	<5	18*
Torrens	23	11	34
Unity Flats	19	8	27
Upper & Lower Duncairn	10	7	17
Upper Ligoniel	42	38	80
Westland	<5	<5	0*
Wheatfield	<5	<5	0*
Whitewell/Lower Whitewell Rd. / Fairyknowe	48	24	72
Whitewell/White City	<5	<5	0*
Total	5	5	10

Note:

* Where there are less than 5 applicants these are not identified for Data protection purposes and to prevent identification of the individual applicant.

TABLE 4 – APPLICANTS IN HOUSING STRESS ON THE NORTH BELFAST SOCIAL HOUSING WAITING LIST BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE AT 31 MARCH 2009 (LATEST INFORMATION AVAILABLE)

North Belfast Common Landlord Area	Older People	Large Adult	Large Family	Single	Small Adult	Small Family	Total
Alliance	<5	0	<5	5	0	<5	5*
Ardoyne	8	0	5	84	<5	59	156*
Ballysillan	10	<5	<5	41	<5	15	66*
Carlisle/New Lodge	15	<5	<5	74	<5	72	161*
Cavehill	20	6	11	99	8	55	199
Cliftondene	0	<5	0	5	0	<5	5*
Cliftonville	31	<5	7	86	<5	48	172*
Duncairn Gardens	<5	0	<5	16	<5	<5	16*
Fairhill	0	0	<5	5	<5	10	15*
Gainsborough	6	0	<5	11	<5	5	22*
Glandore & Dunmore	0	0	0	<5	<5	<5	0*
Grove Area	7	0	<5	7	<5	8	22*
Lower Ligoniel/Glenbank	9	0	0	<5	0	<5	9*
Lower Oldpark	<5	0	0	7	<5	0	7*
M/S Flats - Carlisle	0	0	0	18	0	<5	18*
Mount Vernon Estate	<5	<5	0	8	<5	<5	8*
Newington/Limestone	<5	0	<5	6	0	8	14*
Oldpark	<5	0	<5	42	<5	33	75*
Rosewood/Crumlin RDA	0	0	0	<5	0	0	0*
Ross House Flats/ Mountvernon Flats	0	0	0	5	0	0	5
Shore Road	<5	<5	<5	30	<5	6	36*
Skegoneill/Ashfield/ Fortwilliam	17	<5	<5	30	<5	10	57*
Somerton Rd (Sheltered)	30	<5	0	<5	<5	0	30*
Sunningale	<5	0	<5	7	<5	9	16*
Torrens	5	<5	<5	9	<5	15	29*
Unity Flats	<5	0	<5	10	<5	13	23*
Upper & Lower Duncairn	<5	0	<5	10	0	<5	10*
Upper Ligoniel	<5	<5	11	34	7	25	77*
Westland	<5	0	0	<5	0	<5	0*
Wheatfield	<5	0	0	<5	0	<5	0*
Whitewell/Lwr Whitewell Rd. Fairyknowe	5	0	<5	28	<5	33	66*
Whitewell/White City	<5	0	0	5	0	<5	5*

Notes:**Older People** – Male 60+, Female 60+, Husband & Wife 60+, 3+ OAP, 2 Adults either 60+**Large Adult** – 3+ Adults 0-1 Children**Large Family** – 2 Adults 3 Children, 2 Adults 4+ Children, 1 Parent 3 Children, 1 Parent 4+ Children, 3+ Adults 2+ Children

Single – Single Male 16-59, Single Female 16-59

Small Adult – Husband & Wife 16-59, 2 Adults 16-59

Small Family – 2 Adult 1 Child, 2 Adult 2 Children, 1 Parent 1 Child, 1 Parent 2 Children

(i) * Where there are less than 5 applicants these are not identified for Data protection purposes and to prevent identification of the individual applicant.

TABLE 5 – APPLICANTS IN HOUSING STRESS ON THE NORTH BELFAST SOCIAL HOUSING WAITING LIST BY AGE AT 31ST MARCH 2009 (LATEST INFORMATION AVAILABLE)

North Belfast Common Landlord Area	Under 18	18 - 25 yrs	26 - 29 yrs	30 - 39 yrs	40 - 49 yrs	50 - 59 yrs	60 - 64 yrs	65 yrs+	Total
Carlisle/New Lodge	<5	69	19	33	22	10	<5	14	167*
Duncairn Gardens	0	5	<5	6	8	<5	0	<5	19*
Fairhill	0	<5	5	6	<5	<5	<5	0	11*
Gainsborough	0	10	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5	10*
Glandore & Dunmore	0	<5	0	<5	<5	0	<5	0	0*
Grove Area	0	<5	<5	6	<5	<5	<5	6	12*
M/S Flats - Carlisle	0	7	<5	5	<5	<5	0	0	12*
Mount Vernon Estate	<5	7	<5	<5	<5	<5	0	<5	7*
Newington/Limestone	0	5	0	7	<5	<5	0	<5	12*
Ross House Flats/Mou	0	<5	<5	<5	0	<5	0	0	0*
Shore Road	0	14	6	5	10	6	0	5	46
Skegoneill/Ashfield/	0	14	9	9	6	<5	<5	18	56*
Somerton Rd (Shelter	0	<5	0	0	<5	<5	<5	26	26*
Unity Flats	0	9	<5	8	<5	<5	<5	<5	17*
Upper & Lower Duncai	<5	5	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5	5*
Whitewell/Lwr Whitew	<5	20	10	21	13	<5	<5	<5	64*
Whitewell/White City	<5	<5	0	<5	0	<5	<5	0	0*
Alliance	0	<5	0	6	<5	0	0	<5	6*
Ardoyne	<5	61	15	41	17	12	5	6	157*
Ballysillan	0	38	7	9	5	5	<5	11	75*
Cavehill	0	58	25	37	35	17	11	16	199
Cliftondene	0	<5	<5	<5	0	<5	0	0	0*
Cliftonville	<5	51	21	25	27	18	11	23	176*
Lower Ligoniel/Glenb	0	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5	8	8*
Lower Oldpark	0	<5	<5	<5	0	0	<5	0	0*
Oldpark	0	30	15	13	16	<5	<5	<5	74*
Rosewood/Crumlin RDA	0	<5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0*
Sunningale	0	<5	0	8	5	<5	0	<5	13*
Torrens	<5	10	<5	7	6	0	<5	6	29*
Upper Ligoniel	<5	28	10	17	18	<5	<5	<5	73*
Westland	0	<5	0	0	<5	<5	0	<5	0*
Wheatfield	0	<5	<5	0	0	<5	<5	<5	0*

Note: * Where there are less than 5 applicants these are not identified for Data protection purposes and to prevent identification of the individual applicant

North Belfast Housing District

Ms C Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development for a breakdown of sites in the North Belfast Housing District sold or transferred by her Department into either public or private ownership since 2000, including (i) the size of each site; (ii) the year of sale or transfer; (iii) the location of each site by common landlord area; (iv) the amount the site was sold for; and (v) the official stated purpose for selling or transferring the site, including its intended future use by either a public body or private party. (AQW 3222/10)

Minister for Social Development: The tables attached provide the information requested

TABLE 1 - LAND DISPOSED OF BY THE HOUSING EXECUTIVE TO THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Size (acres)	Year of Sale	Location (by Common Landlord Area)	Amount Sold for	Purpose
5.36	2000	Fairhill/Waveney/Downview	£2,296,000	Housing
1.01	2003	Upper Ligoniel	£15,000	Housing
3.904	2005	Grove	£1,245,000	Housing
0.84	2006	Upper Ligoniel	£170,000	Housing
4.02	2007	Alliance	£627,000	Housing
5.68	2007	Ballysillan	£850,000	Housing
0.098	2008	Gainsborough	£60,000	Housing

TABLE 2 – LAND TRANSFERRED BY THE HOUSING EXECUTIVE TO HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS (AT NIL COST)

Size in Hectares	Year of Transfer	Location (by Common Landlord Area)	Purpose: For Social Housing (Housing Association/Units)
0.31	2001/02	Wheatfield	Fold: 13
0.57	2001/02	Cliftonville	Oaklee: 25
0.38	2001/02	Carlisle	Newington: 13
0.38	2001/02	Carlisle	Newington: 22
1.10	2001/02	Carrickhill	Oaklee: 43
1.20	2002/03	Grove	Grove: 41
0.24	2002/03	Cliftonville	North & West: 6
1.10	2002/03	Carrickhill	Oaklee: 5
0.92	2003/04	Alliance	Helm: 30
0.53	2003/04	Wheatfield	Fold: 18
0.32	2003/04	Grove	Grove: 17
0.622	2003/04	Carlisle	Newington: 32
0.56	2003/04	Cliftonville	Oaklee: 26
0.53	2003/04	Carlisle	Newington: 21
0.73	2004/05	Gainsborough	Helm: 26
1.10	2004/05	Torrens	Fold: 34
0.12	2004/05	Lower Oldpark	Helm: 9
0.92	2005/06	Torrens	Fold: 14
0.88	2005/06	Gainsborough	Clanmil: 35
0.93	2005/06	Ardoyne	North & West: 21
0.03	2006/07	Carlisle	Oaklee: 13

Size in Hectares	Year of Transfer	Location (by Common Landlord Area)	Purpose: For Social Housing (Housing Association/Units)
0.125	2007/08	Various	Clanmil: 16
0.138	2007/08	Ardoyne	North & West: 6
0.73	2007/08	Lower Whitewell	North & West: 12
0.22	2007/08	Carrickhill	Oaklee: 10
0.011	2007/08	Cliftonville	Helm: 1
1.72	2008/09	Torrens	Fold: 112
0.373	2008/09	Ardoyne	Flax: 15
0.51	2009/10	Carlisle	Habinteg: 28
0.412	2009/10	Ardoyne	North & West: 16
0.91	2009/10	Sunningdale/Joanmount	Clanmil: 46
0.13	2009/10	Carrickhill	Oaklee: 11

TABLE 3 – LAND DISPOSED OF BY THE DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT FOR REGENERATION PURPOSES. THIS IS NOT DEFINED BY COMMON LANDLORD AREA AND THE LOCATION HAS BEEN PROVIDED.

Size (Acres)	Year Of Disposal	Site Address	Receipt (£s)	Future use
0.027	2000	63 Duncairn Gardens	2,000	Commercial
0.821	2000	7-9 Alliance Crescent	2,000	Community / Commercial
0.954	2001	Alliance Crescent	30,000	Commercial / Residential
1.665	2002	Land at Glenbank Drive	25,000	Community / Commercial
0.056	2003	40-44 Duncairn Gardens	25,500	Commercial
0.051	2003	937 Crumlin Road	10,000	Retail / Residential
138.13	2003	Land at North Foreshore	950,000	Recreation / Open Space / Commercial / Industrial
0.61	2005	203 Crumlin Road	5,000	Commercial
0.129	2005	146 / 154 North Queen Street	1	Recreation
0.234	2005	Land at Glenbryn Park	85,000	Residential
0.223	2006	164-188 Duncairn Gardens	70,000	Retail / Residential
0.027	2006	181 Duncairn Gdns	10,000	Retail / Residential
0.436	2007	Henry Place / Glenravel Street	64,000	Community / Commercial
0.293	2007	172-176 & 188-194 North Queen Street	225,000	Residential

North Belfast Housing District

Ms C Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of sites in the North Belfast Housing District acquired by her Department or the Housing Executive since 2000; (ii) the size of each site; (iii) the location of each site by common landlord area; (iv) the cost of each site; and (v) the official stated purpose for purchasing each site. (AQW 3224/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has acquired 14 sites in the North Belfast Housing District since 2000. The information requested for these sites is detailed in Table 1 and Table 2 below. Table 3 provides details of 30 sites acquired by the Department for Social Development since 2000.

TABLE 1 – SITES PURCHASED SINCE 2000 BY THE NORTHERN IRELAND HOUSING EXECUTIVE:-

Size (acres)	Location by Common Landlord Area	Cost	Reason for Acquisition
1.554	Cavehill	£1.25m	For social housing
0.45	Lower Oldpark	£130k	For future social housing
0.74	Grove	£430k	For social housing
1.21	Gainsborough	£550k	For social housing
0.32	Cavehill	£637k	For social housing
0.27	Carrickhill	£600k	For social housing
1.2	Carlisle	£600k	For social housing
0.42	Carrickhill	£95k	For social housing

TABLE 2 – SITES VESTED BY THE NORTHERN IRELAND HOUSING EXECUTIVE:-

Size (acres)	Location by Common Landlord Area	Reason For Vesting
1.80	Upper/Lower Whitewell	For social housing
0.24	Ardoyne	For social housing
0.24	Upper Ligoneil	To enable access for social/private housing
0.69	Skegoneill	For social housing & environmental improvement
0.06	Ardoyne	For social housing
0.20	Gainsborough	For social housing

Note: The vesting process involves compensation claims which in many instances have not been agreed, either through negotiations not having been completed or not having identified the owner of the site. It is not currently possible to supply an accurate acquisition cost for individual sites.

TABLE 3 – SITES ACQUIRED BY THE DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT SINCE 2000:-

Size (acres)_	Location by Common Landlord Area	Cost	Reason for acquisition
0.061	203 Crumlin Road	£15k	Regeneration
0.223	164-188 Duncairn Gardens	£55k	Regeneration
0.129	146/154 North Queen Street	£37.5k	Regeneration
0.056	40-44 Duncairn Gardens	£33k	Regeneration
0.051	937 Crumlin Road	£ - *	Regeneration
0.058	499/501 Crumlin Road	£40k	Regeneration
0.108	118-120 Antrim Road	£185k	Regeneration
138.13	Land at North Foreshore	£ - *	Regeneration
0.139	Adam Street Gospel Hall	£72.5k	Regeneration
1.626	Alliance Rd / Glenbryn Pk / Berwick Rd	£400k	Regeneration
0.018	10 York Road	£10k	Regeneration
0.019	176 North Queen Street	£ - *	Regeneration
0.238	Land at Ballysillan Park	£62.5k	Regeneration
0.236	188-194 North Queen Street	£270k	Regeneration
0.012	12 York Road	£30k	Regeneration

Size (acres)_	Location by Common Landlord Area	Cost	Reason for acquisition
0.131	22-28 & 40 Oldpark Road	£20k	Regeneration
0.026	42-44 Oldpark Road	£52k	Regeneration
0.011	184 North Queen Street	£25k	Regeneration
0.063	30-34 Oldpark Road	£100k	Regeneration
0.127	50-58 York Road	£265k	Regeneration
0.170	294-296 Crumlin Road	£200k	Regeneration
0.028	20 Oldpark Road	£92.5k	Regeneration
0.031	36-38 Oldpark Road	£160k	Regeneration
0.024	28 Duncairn Gardens	£145k	Regeneration
0.365	35-55 Carr's Glen Park	£650k	Regeneration
0.252	44-50 Carr's Glen Park	£325k	Regeneration
0.980	Ballysillan Park / Carr's Glen Park	£55k	Regeneration
0.028	970-976 Shore Road	£200k	Regeneration
0.726	Land at Alliance Crescent	£23.1k	Regeneration
14.0	Girdwood Army Barracks	£7m	Regeneration

* Compensation figure not yet agreed for these sites

Social Housing Waiting List

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how many (i) disabled people; (ii) young people; and (iii) single men are currently on the social housing waiting list; and how many people in these groups were on the list in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3227/10)

Minister for Social Development: In relation to (i) the information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not collate information regarding applicants with a disability other than where it pertains to the housing needs of the applicant. However, at 31 March 2009 there were 436 applicants requiring wheelchair accessible accommodation and Table 1 details social housing applicant households with functional mobility problems, that is, cannot climb stairs/need a downstairs toilet/need a 'through lift' etc. with regard to their current accommodation.

TABLE 1

	30 Sep 09	31 Mar 09	31 Mar 08	31 Mar 07
Housing Applicant Households - with functional mobility problems	8,070	8,336	8,660	8,031

In relation to (ii) and (iii) Table 2 details the number of young people and single men on the waiting list in the last 3 years.

TABLE 2

	30 Jun 09	31 Mar 09	31 Mar 08	31 Mar 07
Young People under 25	8,280	8,431	9,059	8,344
Single Men 16-59	11,135	11,228	11,235	10,523

Housing Executive

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) as a percentage; and (ii) in monetary terms the annual and overall rent increases for Housing Executive tenants in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 3228/10)

Minister for Social Development: The table below details the percentage rent increases, the average rent increases for Housing Executive tenants over the last 10 years, and the gross NIHE rental income for the last 10 years.

It should be noted that, while the average rental income has increased year-on-year, the gross rental income has largely decreased because of the number of Housing Executive dwellings sold through the house sales policy.

	% Rent Increase	Average Rent Increase (per NIHE dwelling) (£)	Gross NIHE Rental Income (£k)
2000/01	4.5	1.66	247,169
2001/02	3.0	1.16	240,857
2002/03	3.0	1.19	234,402
2003/04	3.25	1.35	226,584
2004/05	3.0	1.31	221,767
2005/06	3.1	1.54	222,417
2006/07	2.7	1.31	221,981
2007/08	3.6	1.78	227,028
2008/09	3.95	1.99	235,409
2009/10	1.95	1.03	239,373

Egan Contracts

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to list the schemes that will be brought forward as a result of the release of a further £12 million for Egan contracts.

(AQW 3366/10)

Minister for Social Development: The following schemes have been identified for starts when the £12 million is released to the Egan contractors.

External Cyclical Maintenance

- Moyard, Belfast
- Craigyhill & Rural, Larne
- Roden Street (South), Belfast
- Divis, Belfast
- Greystone Park, Mullaghmesh

Revenue Replacement

- Seacourt Kitchens, Larne
- Whitehead/ Eden Kitchens, Carrickfergus
- New Barnsley Phase 2, Belfast
- Suffolk Kitchens Phase 1, Belfast
- Springwell/ Denamona, Omagh
- Lecky Road/ Court, Quarry Street, Derry
- Glenelly View/ Millbrook, Strabane
- Milltown Estate Kitchens, Lisburn
- Millars (1988/9/90), Dundonald

- Brownstown Flats, Portadown
- Gilford, Banbridge
- Rural Estates, Mourneview, Lurgan
- Ardcarne Park, Newry
- Mullaghbawn/ Crossmaglen
- Ashfield Court, Belfast
- Movilla Kitchens, Newtownards
- Shankill/ Wakehurst, Lurgan
- Dromara Kinallen, Banbridge
- Markethill, Armagh
- Mossley Mallusk, Newtownabbey
- Suffolk Phase 2, Belfast
- Ballybone Phase 3, Belfast
- Jubilee Kitchens, Lisburn
- Bowtown 1988/89 Kitchens, Newtownards
- Fallowlea/ Millpath/ Desmond, Derry
- Ballybeen/ Moatview, Dundonald

Heating

- Donaghadee
- Enniskillen
- Meenan Drive/Westland Street, Derry
- Newpark, Antrim
- Currynierin Waterside, Derry
- Elmfield/ Manor/ Ligoniel, Belfast
- Flying Horse/ Model Farm, Downpatrick
- Lisnaskea, Fermanagh
- Ardowen, Lurgan
- Glenville, Newtownabbey
- Belfast Ad Hoc Replacements

Fund Raising

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of whether it is acceptable for fund-raising to be held for a specific charity or cause where the businesses or individuals involved in the fund-raising can directly profit; (ii) if fund-raising bodies are required to disclose a full breakdown of costs incurred, or likely to be incurred, in the process of fund-raising, specifically to those who donated or plan to donate; and (iii) if all fund-raising bodies are subject to scrutiny. (AQW 3419/10)

Minister for Social Development: (i) Many charities employ what are termed professional fundraisers to collect or raise money on their behalf. These can be individuals or companies. This is entirely legal but in terms of good practice all collectors should wear identification and indicate that they are collecting on behalf of the charity and if not done on a voluntary basis, that they are being paid to do so. Under current legislation all public collections whether made directly by a charity or by a commercial body on their behalf are required by law to have a permit issued by the PSNI to do so.

(ii) Under the new Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008, charities will be required to make annual returns to the Charity Commission detailing their financial activity in the preceding year, this will include any fundraising. This will be placed on the Charity Commission web site and the public will be able to view this.

(iii) The Charities Act also introduces new requirements in relation to public collections and this extends to charities, philanthropic and benevolent bodies. In the first instance an application to carry out collections

will be made and a certificate indicating that the body is a fit organisation to do so will be issued; then when an actual collection is to take place that body will request a permit to do so. Additionally the Charities Act introduces requirements on professional fundraisers to state that they are being paid by the charity to carry out the collection.

The Charities Act will be introduced in stages over the next three years.

Funding for Women's Centres

Rt Hon J Donaldson asked the Minister for Social Development what future funding her Department intends to provide to women's centres to maintain the provision of childcare for women from a disadvantaged background; and if she will make a statement to the Assembly on this matter. (AQW 3424/10)

Minister for Social Development: My Department has committed £1.84 million to maintain the provision of childcare for women from a disadvantaged background. Details of this funding to specific women's groups have been placed in the Assembly library. Neighbourhood Renewal contracts for funding have been allocated up to the end of March 2011 and Women's Centres Childcare Fund contracts to March 2010. Future decisions on funding childcare through the Women's Centres Childcare Fund will be subject to available funding and guided by the deliberations and outcomes of the Executive review of childcare currently being undertaken by OFMdFM under the guidance of the Ministerial sub-group on children and young people. I have no plans to make a statement to the Assembly on this matter.

Unfit Housing

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how many (i) Housing Executive; and (ii) registered housing association properties are deemed unfit in each local council area. (AQW 3425/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested. However, in relation to (i) Table 1 below gives details by District Office area of Housing Executive properties that are considered derelict and pending demolition, subject to any necessary approvals. In relation to (ii) Table 2 gives details of registered housing association properties that are considered unlettable, to be refurbished, pending demolition or consideration is being given to options for reimprovement.

TABLE 1 – HOUSING EXECUTIVE PROPERTIES

District Office	Pending Demolition
Belfast West	1
Belfast East	0
Belfast North	46
Belfast Shankill	219
Belfast South	140
Belfast Area	406
Bangor	35
Newtownards	29
Castlereagh	24
Lisburn Antrim St	0
Lisburn Dairy Farm	0
Downpatrick	0
South East Area	88

District Office	Pending Demolition
Banbridge	0
Newry	0
Armagh	1
Lurgan/Brownlow	3
Portadown	6
Dungannon	0
Fermanagh	0
South Area	10
Ballymena	31
Antrim	0
Newtownabbey 1	28
Newtownabbey 2	0
Carrickfergus	0
Larne	87
Ballycastle	0
Ballymoney	0
Coleraine	0
North East Area	146
Waterloo Place	0
Waterside	0
Collon Terrace	0
Limavady	0
Magherafelt	0
Strabane	1
Omagh	0
Cookstown	0
West Area	1
Total	651

Notes: figures in Table 1 include properties connected to regeneration zones and flats.

TABLE 2 – HOUSING ASSOCIATION PROPERTIES

District Council Area	No.
Antrim	2
Armagh	0
Ballymena	0
Ballymoney	0

District Council Area	No.
Banbridge	0
Belfast	6
Carrickfergus	0
Castlereagh	0
Coleraine	0
Cookstown	0
Craigavon	0
Derry	2
Dungannon	0
Down	8
Fermanagh	0
Larne	4
Limavady	0
Lisburn	0
Magherafelt	0
Moyle	0
Newtownabbey	0
Newtownards	0
Newry & Mourne	0
North Down	0
Omagh	0
Strabane	0

Social Housing

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to list all current restrictions on the right to buy social housing. (AQW 3426/10)

Minister for Social Development: The House Sales Scheme succeeded the “Right to Buy” and Voluntary Sales Schemes. Entitlement to buy only arises after the tenant has been a secure tenant (of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive or qualifying landlord) for a period of not less than five years, or for periods amounting together to not less than five years. Under the auspices of the House Sales Scheme, these secure tenants may purchase their home provided:

1. It is not a sheltered dwelling unit;
2. It is not a single storey or ground floor dwelling (other than a flat) with no more than two bedrooms to which either of the following conditions applies:
 - (a) the relevant tenancy began on or after 1st September 2002
 - (b) the relevant tenancy began prior to 1st November 2000 and both of the following sub-conditions apply:
 - (i) a person of at least 60 years of age was the tenant and/or a member of the tenant’s household when the relevant tenancy began
 - (ii) the relevant tenancy did not begin because of a compulsory transfer from another Housing Executive dwelling in respect of which the tenant had the right to buy.
3. The tenant has not been served with a relevant statutory notice seeking possession at any time within the previous three months.

4. Proceedings for possession of the dwelling pursuant to a relevant statutory notice are not pending.
5. The landlord is not actively considering whether it would be appropriate to serve- at some stage within the next three months- a relevant statutory notice seeking possession.

A secure tenant also cannot exercise a right to buy where they are obliged to give up possession of the dwelling in pursuance of an Order of the Court which has been granted pursuant to a relevant statutory notice or will be so obliged at a date specified in the Order.

Where a secure tenant is in rent arrears, no sale will be completed until all arrears of rent or any other payment due from them as a secure tenant have been paid.

Social Housing

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development what is the current discount level on purchasing social housing; and how this level has changed in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 3427/10)

Minister for Social Development: Details of the levels of discounts available, together with a summary of qualification criteria for statutory house sales are detailed below.

1. From May 1993 the following arrangements applied:
 - a. in respect of house sales, tenancies of less than two years qualified for a 30% discount and tenancies of two years qualified for discount of 32% with an additional 1% discount for each additional completed year of tenancy, up to a maximum of 60% (subject to Historic Cost, which is explained below).
 - b. in respect of flat sales, tenancies of less than two years qualified for a 40% discount and tenancies of two years qualified for discount of 44% with an additional 2% discount for each additional completed year of tenancy, up to a maximum of 70% (subject to Historic Cost).
2. From September 2002 a two year minimum tenancy qualification existed and the following arrangements applied:
 - a. in respect of house sales, tenancies of two years qualified for discount of 32% with an additional 1% discount for each additional completed year of tenancy, up to a maximum of 60% (subject to Historic Cost).
 - b. in respect of flat sales, tenancies of two years qualified for discount of 44% with an additional 2% discount for each additional completed year of tenancy up to a maximum of 70% (subject to Historic Cost).

The maximum level of discount available from September 2002 was £34,000.

3. From October 2004 tenants were required to have been qualifying tenants for a minimum of five years before being eligible to purchase their social home under the rules of the House Sales Scheme. A tenancy of five years qualified for discount of 20% with an additional 2% discount for each additional completed year of tenancy up to a maximum of 60% (subject to Historic Cost). A revised maximum level of discount was also placed at £24,000. These revisions applied to both houses and flats sales.

Housing Associations were not required to sell homes to tenants until the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 came into operation. However, those that operated a voluntary scheme typically applied the rules set out above.

Historic Cost is the amount incurred in the provision, improvement or acquisition of the dwelling. It includes the current financial year and the ten years before the purchase is made.

Right to Buy Scheme

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how many (i) Housing Executive; and (ii) registered housing association properties have been sold under the right to buy scheme, with a discount, in each local council area, in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 3428/10)

Minister for Social Development: During the last ten years, over 36,000 homes have been sold to social tenants. Information about sales to housing association tenants are not available in the format requested. Table 1 below sets out data in respect of Northern Ireland Housing Executive house sales. Table 2 sets out data in respect of housing association house sales.

TABLE 1: SALES OF DWELLINGS BY THE NORTHERN IRELAND HOUSING EXECUTIVE BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA 1999/00 TO 2008/09

District Council Area	99/00	00/01	01/02	02/03	03/04	04/05	05/06	06/07	07/08	08/09
Antrim	128	191	141	168	173	121	113	93	23	1
Ards	151	162	202	172	232	130	77	85	28	1
Armagh	154	155	177	135	151	58	59	50	15	3
Ballymena	134	224	96	147	167	141	105	66	14	3
Ballymoney	58	91	93	73	79	54	41	37	8	2
Banbridge	134	106	145	124	117	75	45	23	21	0
Belfast	1024	1079	858	1,605	1,079	539	482	480	208	9
Carrickfergus	77	138	133	176	156	74	47	64	22	0
Castlereagh	140	228	196	215	205	125	78	81	20	1
Coleraine	106	157	131	133	108	85	80	53	18	1
Cookstown	77	106	61	92	96	55	52	32	13	0
Craigavon	193	178	194	173	252	131	109	102	39	1
Derry	383	376	406	576	584	309	234	201	59	7
Down	141	191	242	193	202	104	59	49	19	3
Dungannon	122	109	151	141	119	59	50	45	15	1
Fermanagh	136	157	143	166	135	88	86	69	43	8
Larne	61	91	44	66	82	36	30	39	18	1
Limavady	113	123	87	111	96	56	57	26	10	0
Lisburn	265	477	503	505	498	230	195	183	67	3
Magherafelt	136	131	92	119	103	51	57	43	5	0
Moyle	27	63	38	39	54	34	36	23	11	1
Newry & Mourne	269	328	287	266	312	131	115	77	29	3
Newtownabbey	133	284	247	240	245	159	113	127	46	4
Newtownards	78	121	115	127	170	66	77	36	25	0
Omagh	118	140	115	111	84	60	57	47	14	1
Strabane	168	149	114	181	153	82	68	70	18	0
Sales of NIHE Dwellings	4,526	5,555	5,011	6,054	5,652	3,053	2,522	2,201	808	54

TABLE 2: SALES OF DWELLINGS BY HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS 1999/00 TO 2008/09

	99/00	00/01	01/02	02/03	03/04	04/05	05/06	06/07	07/08	08/09
Sales to Tenants	78	94	108	152	110	109	173	188	76	7

Housing Benefit

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how many (i) Housing Executive; (ii) registered housing associations; and (iii) private rented sector tenants are currently in receipt of housing benefit; and what is the monetary value of the housing benefit received by each sector. (AQW 3429/10)

Minister for Social Development: At 1 December 2009 the number in receipt of Housing Benefit claims was as follows:-

Housing Executive claims	Housing Association claims	Private Sector claims
68,113	20,694	59,416

The information in relation to the monetary value of the housing benefit received by each sector is not available in the format requested. The Housing Executive currently reports Housing Benefit expenditure on the basis of public sector (NIHE) tenants and private sector (non NIHE tenants). The private sector expenditure figure therefore includes expenditure for Housing Association related housing benefit claims.

The most recent expenditure figures for 2008 -2009 are as follows:

Public Sector (NIHE) expenditure	Private Sector (includes Housing Association expenditure)
£199.5 million	£263.4 million

Civil Servants' Earnings

Mr J Craig asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 2907/10, to detail (i) the job titles; (ii) pay scale; and (iii) the total amount earned by the civil servants in question. (AQW 3442/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the table below. It is NICS policy, taking account of the Data Protection Act, not to disclose the remuneration details of individual civil servants other than in broad terms. Total amounts earned are therefore stated in bands of £5,000.

Job Title	Pay Scale	Total Amount £'000
Permanent Secretary	Pay Band 3 (£98,059 - £205,000)	125-130
Deputy Secretary, Resources, Housing & Social Security Group	Pay Band 2 (£81,600 - £160,000)	105-110
Deputy Secretary, Urban Regeneration & Community Development Group	Pay Band 2 (£81,600 - £160,000)	100-105
Chief Executive, Social Security Agency	Pay Band 2 (£81,600 - £160,000)	90-95
Deputy Secretary, Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division	Pay Band 2 (£81,600 - £160,000)	90-95
Assistant Secretary	Pay Band 1 (£57,300 - £116,000)	80-85

Shared Future Housing

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how much her Department has spent on 'shared future' housing in each of the last three years. (AQW 3477/10)

Minister for Social Development: A twin track approach has been adopted to deliver shared housing, firstly through the new build programme and, secondly, through the Shared Neighbourhood Programme.

In relation to the new build programme, in order for a scheme to become a "shared future scheme" it must firstly be on the new build programme on the basis of housing need, i.e. the scheme would be funded and delivered regardless of its 'shared' designation. There is, therefore, no direct attributable cost to the new build programme in addition to the normal Housing Association Grant.

The Shared Neighbourhood Programme commenced in May 2008 and is a 3 year pilot programme delivered on the ground by the Housing Executive across 30 estates in Northern Ireland. The Programme costs approximately

£1million with the International Fund for Ireland providing £698,000 of this. The remainder is funded by the Department for Social Development through the Housing Executive.

Social Security and Pensions Legislation

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development for an estimate of the total cost involved in developing all social security and pensions legislation, from initial proposal to making of Regulations or Acts, in her Department since May 2007. (AQW 3478/10)

Minister for Social Development: The estimated total cost to my Department in developing social security and pensions legislation since May 2007 is £1.8 million.

Social Security and Pensions Legislation

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development for an estimate of the cost to her Department of drafting all social security and pensions legislation in each of the last three years. (AQW 3480/10)

Minister for Social Development: The estimated cost to my Department of drafting all social security and pensions legislation in each of the last three years is as follows—

2007	2008	2009
£474,000	£494,000	£501,000

Social Security and Pensions Legislation

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development for an estimate of the cost to her Department of consultation on all social security and pensions legislation in each of the last three years. (AQW 3481/10)

Minister for Social Development: The estimated cost to my Department of consultation on social security and pensions legislation in each of the last three years is as follows—

2007	2008	2009
£7,100	£11,800	£24,300

Household Fuel Payments

Ms A Lo asked the Minister for Social Development to explain why people deemed eligible for future Household Fuel payments in December 2008 will now not receive these payments. (AQW 3499/10)

Minister for Social Development: My Department made a Household Fuel Payment to over 165,000 households automatically during April and May this year. In order to make provision for those households who did not receive a payment but were entitled, the regulations provided an opportunity for potential beneficiaries to apply for a payment. Any person who was eligible for a Household Fuel Payment, and did not receive it by 31 May 2009, could apply in writing to my Department by 30 June 2009. Over 2,000 successful applications were received and Household Fuel Payments were made to these householders.

Following representation from a number of elected representatives I contacted Departmental Solicitor's Office who confirmed that there is no legal cover to make a payment to applicants who missed the 30 June deadline.

Economic Crisis

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development what new initiatives, measures and practices have been implemented by her Department as a means of assisting the community, and achieving improved, efficient decision making during the current economic crisis. (AQW 3501/10)

Minister for Social Development: I have ring fenced £155m for the Social Housing Development Programme this year that will deliver 1750 new homes for those across the community in greatest need. This will be the largest number of new homes started in the last ten years and is offering a valuable lifeline to many in the construction industry who have been so badly affected by the collapse of the private house building sector.

My Department has also brought forward a number of new initiatives aimed at making our scarce resources go further, supporting those communities in housing need. For example, a new procurement strategy has been introduced to deliver new homes more efficiently than ever before, and in Lisburn, the purchase of former Military Housing has given 112 families the chance to get a home much sooner than would otherwise have been the case.

In terms of new initiatives, I have made additional resources available to support the voluntary advice sector in this time of recession and increasing demand on their services. Additional funding in excess of £0.5m has been made available to help support the frontline voluntary advice provision across Northern Ireland and to contribute to the provision of additional training for the advice sector.

As regards measures and practices, the Department deploys an innovative “risk based” approach to ensure that funding to low risk projects is released quickly and with the minimum bureaucracy. Under this arrangement, funding utilised to support salary costs within projects can be paid up to six months in advance.

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development what targets her Department set within the Investing for Health strategy; and what progress has been made to date against these targets. (AQW 3505/10)

Minister for Social Development: Targets set for the Investing for Health strategy reflect the cross cutting nature of the strategy and require collaborative working across Departments to tackle the factors which adversely affect health and perpetuate health inequalities.

My Department has the policy lead for two targets. These relate to reducing levels of fuel poverty and supporting housing providers to build affordable homes. Both targets have been met.

Child Maintenance Legislation

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development for an estimate of the total cost involved in developing all child maintenance legislation, from initial proposal to making of Regulations or Acts, in her Department since May 2007. (AQW 3513/10)

Minister for Social Development: Since May 2007 the estimated cost of developing and making all child maintenance legislation from initial proposals through to making of Regulations and Act is £307,567

Child Maintenance Legislation

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development for an estimate of the cost to her Department of drafting all child maintenance legislation in each of the last three years. (AQW 3514/10)

Minister for Social Development: The estimated costs for drafting child maintenance legislation in each of the last three years are;

2007	2008	2009
£45,756	£49,834	£48,381

Child Maintenance Legislation

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development for an estimate of the cost to her Department of consultation on all child maintenance legislation in each of the last three years. (AQW 3515/10)

Minister for Social Development: The estimated consultation costs incurred by the Department on all child maintenance legislation in each of the last three years are;

2007	2008	2009
£4443	£4631	Nil

Civil Servants' Earnings

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many civil servants in her Department receive an annual salary (i) between £37,801-£43,100; (ii) between £43,101-50,537; (iii) between £50,538-71,433; (iv) between £71,434-82,975; and (v) above £82,975. (AQW 3523/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the table below.

Pay Range	Number of Staff
Between £37,801 - £43,100	74
Between £43,101-50,537	29
Between £50,538-71,433	23
Between £71,434-82,975	4
Above £82,975	5

Housing Executive Posts

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the total number; (ii) the location; and (iii) the grade of posts within the Housing Executive, and other public bodies within her Department's remit, which are located in (a) the Omagh district; and (b) the Strabane district. (AQW 3546/10)

Minister for Social Development: The tables below detail the number of staff currently employed by the Housing Executive (Table 1) and the Department (Tables 2 and 3) in the Omagh and Strabane Districts.

TABLE 1

Grade	Omagh	Strabane
Level 07 (Principal Officer)	3	1
Level 06 (Assistant Principal Officer)	4	1
Level 05 (Senior Officer)	5	1
Level 04 (Senior Administrative Officer)	21	5
Level 03 (Administrative Officer)	8	3
Level 02 (Clerical Officer)	48	4
Level 01 (Clerical Assistant)	3	1
Technical level 07	2	0
Technical level 03	3	0
Technical level 02	9	3
Total	106	19

TABLE 2

Grade	Omagh Jobs and Benefit Office	Regional Development Office, Kevlin Buildings	Appeals Service	Total
Grade 7	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00
Deputy Principal	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00
Staff Officer	1.50	3.50	1.00	6.00
Executive Officer 1	7.81	2.00	1.00	10.81
Executive Officer 2	28.87	0.00	3.60	32.47
Administrative Officer	41.33	2.00	15.10	58.43
Administrative Assistant	4.40	0.00	2.20	6.60
Support Grade Band 2	1.00	0.00	1.00	2.00
Temporary AA	9.00	0.00	1.00	10.00
Typists	0.00	0.00	2.00	2.00
Temporary SGB2	2.00	0.00	0.00	2.00
Total	95.91	9.50	26.90	132.31

In addition to the table above, the Social Security Agency has a Medical Examination Centre in Kelvin Building, Omagh. It is staffed by a Medical Attendant Manager (equivalent to Executive Officer 11) and a Medical Attendant (equivalent to Administrative Officer) on a part-time basis an average of 1 day and 1.5 days respectively per week.

TABLE 3

GRADE	Strabane Social Security Office
Staff Officer	1.00
Executive Officer 1	1.68
Executive Officer 2	18.74
Administrative Officer	20.45
Administrative Assistant	2.00
Support Grade Band 2	3.00
Temporary AA	3.00
Total	49.87

Boiler Scrappage Scheme

Mr D O'Loan asked the Minister for Social Development if he will introduce a boiler scrappage scheme similar to the scheme announced by the Chancellor in the pre-budget report. (AQW 3570/10)

Minister for Social Development: My Department is considering a boiler replacement scheme as part of its review of the Fuel Poverty Strategy. The new strategy will be subject to public consultation early in 2010.

Examining Medical Practitioners

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the average amount paid to Examining Medical Practitioners per assessment in relation to sickness benefits and Disability Living Allowance. (AQW 3606/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the table below.

Benefit	Average amount paid per assessment (£)
* Incapacity Benefit	52
* Severe Disablement Allowance	52
* Employment and Support Allowance (Limited Capacity for Work)	52
* Employment and Support Allowance (Work Focused Health Related Assessment)	39
* Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit	62.40
Disability Living Allowance	70.50

* Incapacity Benefit, Severe Disablement Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance and Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit medical assessments are paid on a sessional basis. A session is a specified period of 3.5 hours and the figures given for average cost per assessment for each benefit are derived from average cost per session. Doctors who carry out Disability Living Allowance assessments are paid per assessment. Average costs per assessment include travelling and subsistence expenses paid to doctors.

Temporary Heating to Households

Ms D Purvis asked the Minister for Social Development (i) to outline the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's policy in providing temporary heating to households whose main or only heating system has broken down; (ii) what form temporary heating takes; (iii) how the needs of particular households are assessed; and (iv) if there are any plans to review this policy in light of the recent prolonged period of sub-zero temperatures (AQW 3645/10)

Minister for Social Development: If the heating system in a house fails, and it is not possible to complete the necessary repairs in the same day, it is the Housing Executive's policy to provide at least 2 temporary heaters. These heaters would normally be in addition to an existing electric focal point fire which the majority of Housing Executive homes have. These temporary heaters would normally be either 3kw electric convector fan heaters or 3kw electric panel heaters. The Housing Executive's contractor will assess particular cases at the time of the repair visit, consult with the tenant and provide additional heaters, beyond the 2 normally provided, if required. This will depend on the household makeup and the length of time the tenant will be without heat. Normally this would be done in liaison with the Housing Executive's District Office. There are no plans, at this time, to review the policy.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Claims

Mr A Attwood asked the Assembly Commission to detail (i) the total amount paid by the Commission to settle claims against it; (ii) the total amount, and in each case, paid towards plaintiff legal costs; and (iii) the total amount, and in each case, paid in defence legal costs, in financial years (a) 2007/08; (b) 2008/09; and (c) 2009/10 to date. (AQW 3589/10)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson):

- (i) The Commission considers that any amount paid by it to settle claims against it forms part of the relevant terms of settlement, and the Commission regards such information as confidential. Furthermore, due to the small number of such claims, aggregation of such amounts is not appropriate. The Commission therefore regrets that it would be inappropriate of it to answer this part of your question.
- (ii) The Commission considers that any amount paid by it towards the legal costs of a plaintiff forms part of the relevant terms of settlement, and the Commission regards such information as confidential. Furthermore, due to the small number of such claims, aggregation of such amounts is not appropriate. The Commission therefore regrets that it would be inappropriate of it to answer this part of your question.
- (iii) Due to the small number of claims in any year, the Commission regards it as inappropriate to provide a yearly breakdown as requested. However, in the interests of transparency, it is content to provide an aggregate amount. The amount paid to external professional legal providers in defence legal costs for

financial years 2007/08, 2008/09, and 2009/10 (to 01/12/2009) is £146,158. Internal costs were also incurred in relation to staff time and other resources, but these are not quantified.

Reid Review

Mr A Attwood asked the Assembly Commission to detail the amount paid to (i) Mr. George Reid in relation to the Reid Review; (ii) Mr. John Hunter in relation to the Reid Review; and (iii) each of the other members of the Reid Review. (AQW 3590/10)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson):

- (i) The amount paid to Mr George Reid in respect of the Review of the Assembly Secretariat was £6,714.
- (ii) The amount paid to Mr John Hunter in respect of the Review of the Assembly Secretariat was £25,239.
- (iii) The amount paid to Mr Robert Campton in respect of the Review of the Assembly Secretariat was £6,453.
- (iv) The amount paid to Irwin Turbitt in respect of the Review of the Assembly Secretariat was £3,500.

Expenses

Mr A Attwood asked the Assembly Commission to detail in each financial year since 2007 (i) the total cost of travel, accommodation and other expenses incurred by Commission members in relation to their duties as Commission members; (ii) the number of visits to the Republic of Ireland, including to Dublin by the Commission, the total cost of travel, accommodation and other expenses incurred by Commission members in relation to their duties as Commission members during the visits, including the names of any hotels where Commission members stayed and accommodation cost per Commission member for the hotel accommodation; (iii) the number of visits to Britain by the Commission, the total cost of travel, accommodation and other expenses incurred by Commission members in relation to their duties as Commission members during the visits, including the names of any hotels where Commission members stayed, and accommodation cost per Commission member for the hotel accommodation; (iv) the number of visits outside Britain and Ireland by the Commission, the total cost of travel, accommodation and other expenses incurred by Commission members in relation to their duties as Commission members during the visits, including the names of any hotels where Commission members stayed and accommodation cost per Commission member for the hotel accommodation. (AQW 3591/10)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson):

- (i) The total cost of travel, accommodation and other expenses incurred by Commission Members in relation to their duties as Commission Members for each financial year since 2007 is as follows:

2007/08	2008/09	2009/10 year to date
£750.00	£22,758.90	£4,197.81

- (ii) The Assembly Commission undertook two visits to Dublin since 2007. The total cost for travel, accommodation and other expenses incurred by Commission Members in relation to their duties was £1391.66. On the first occasion, Commission Members stayed at the Buswells Hotel, Dublin at a cost of £107 per Commission Member. On the second occasion, the Commission were hosted by the Oireachtas, there were no accommodation costs incurred during this visit. The Members stayed at the Merrion Hotel, Dublin.
- (iii) The Assembly Commission made no visits to Britain within the financial years since 2007 – 2009.
- (iv) The Assembly Commission made one visit outside Britain in May 2008, when it travelled to Canada. The total costs for travel and other expenses incurred by Commission Members in relation to their duties during this visit were £17,275.10. The Commission Members were hosted by the Canadian Parliament, at the Fairmont Château Laurier Hotel, Ottawa and Nova Scotian Parliament, at the Halifax Marriott Harbourfront, Nova Scotia. There were no accommodation costs incurred.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 15 January 2010

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what targets their Department set within the Investing for Health strategy; and what progress has been made to date against these targets. (AQW 3509/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): Lead responsibility for the Investing for Health Strategy lies with the Minister of Health Social Services and Public Safety. The strategy focuses on high level targets that are intended to measure progress towards reducing health inequalities. The objective most closely linked to OFDMFM is “to reduce poverty in families with children”. A target was not set at the time of publication as it was intended that this would “be formulated when baseline data was available”.

Work has been progressing in our department to tackle child poverty. We have sought legislative consent from the Assembly that the UK Child Poverty Bill would extend here. The Bill contains challenging targets on poverty in relation to absolute income, relative income, material deprivation and relative income, and persistent poverty; the intention is clearly to reduce, and indeed eradicate, child poverty by 2020.

We have also been developing an action plan to implement Lifetime Opportunities, the Executive’s Anti-poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy, and a monitoring framework that will allow us to measure progress against a range of measures over time. This work is contributing to meeting objectives in the strategy to reduce health inequalities.

We brought forward the Financial Assistance Act and this facilitated additional winter fuel payments to be paid and this will contribute to meeting targets around fuel poverty in the strategy. We recently received the Report of the Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group on Disability and with Executive colleagues will be considering how best to implement its findings. Work on disability and promoting social inclusion generally is also contributing to work that will reduce health inequalities.

‘Big Bully’ Publication

Mr S Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much was spent by the Children and Young People’s Unit on (i) producing; and (ii) distributing the ‘Big Bully’ publication. (AQW 3575/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: In its October 2008 Concluding Observations on the UK State Party’s report on progress against the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Committee recommended that government should intensify its efforts to tackle bullying and violence in schools.

During the summer months, OFMDFM carried out a programme of workshops with children and young people to seek their views on the children and young people’s strategy action plan with particular consideration of the concluding observations issued by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. During the workshops ‘bullying’ was also identified by children and young people as a high priority issue for them.

To help to tackle this problem, the Children and Young People’s Unit spent £33,222 to date in producing and distributing the ‘Big Bully’ comic to all primary school children here. This cost includes the compiling, translation and printing.

The comic provided the children and their parents with information on what bullying is; how to deal with it; how to protect themselves; who to tell when they are being bullied; why people become bullies; and bullying in schools.

Economically Inactive People

Mr S Hamilton asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many people were economically inactive in each of the last five years, broken down by religious background. (AQW 3603/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The table below shows the numbers of people aged sixteen years and over economically inactive in each of the last five years for which data is available broken down by religion.

Date	Economically Inactive Persons Aged 16+							
	Protestant		Roman Catholic		Other religion / non determined		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
2005	282000	52.5	228000	42.3	28000	5.2	538000	100
2006	293000	54.3	209000	38.8	37000	6.9	539000	100
2007	286000	53.3	211000	39.4	39000	7.3	536000	100
2008	291000	52.6	225000	40.6	37000	6.8	553000	100
2009 ⁱ	303000	52.8	239000	41.7	32000	5.5	573000	100

Source Labour Force Survey

Note 1. Data for 2009 relates to the July – September period

The table below shows the numbers of people of working age economically inactive in each of the last five years for which data is available broken down by religion.

Data is presented for both persons aged sixteen years plus and those of working age (16 - retirement age). This distinction is made as persons aged over retirement age are predominantly economically inactive.

Date	Economically Inactive Persons of Working Age							
	Protestant		Roman Catholic		Other religion / non determined		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
2005	126000	42.9	148000	50.2	20000	6.9	294000	100
2006	131000	44.7	138000	47.0	25000	8.3	294000	100
2007	125000	43.5	135000	47.1	27000	9.4	288000	100
2008	127000	42.8	144000	48.4	26000	8.8	298000	100
2009 ⁱ	130000	41.9	155000	50.1	25000	8.0	310000	100

Source Labour Force Survey

Note 1. Data for 2009 relates to the July – September period

Inter-Agency Joint Protocol on Flags

Dr S Farry asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the current review of the Inter-Agency Joint Protocol on Flags, and for a list of the participants in the review. (AQW 3615/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The working group set up to look at the current Flags Protocol and to review it has met on two occasions on 7th October and 23rd November 2009.

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Elite Facilities Programme

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 1814/10, to detail the reasons for the delay in announcing successful applications to Stage Two of the Elite Facilities Programme; and when he expects this announcement to be made. (AQW 3622/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr N McCausland): The Department in conjunction with Sport NI are considering draft Outline Business Cases for the associated projects, which it is expected will require modification.

It is expected that this consideration will largely be completed by the end of January with a view to notifying applicants as soon as possible thereafter.

Relocation of PRONI

Mr D McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if at any stage of the procurement process for the relocation of PRONI another site was identified as being more suitable than the Titanic Quarter. (AQW 3689/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The category of 'site suitability' was one of several factors included in evaluation criteria of the expressions of interest from developers to provide a site and build a new public record office. 2 of the 5 shortlisted developer's sites – both at the Gasworks, Belfast – scored marginally higher than the Titanic Quarter site in relation to the 'site suitability' element. However, all 5 of the shortlisted sites satisfied the key criteria of being physically accessible to the public and staff, close to a main transport corridor, serviced by public transport routes and located within a radius of 2 miles of the City Hall. All 5 were invited to tender and the Titanic Quarter submission was assessed to be the most economically advantageous in terms of quality and price.

Relocation of PRONI

Mr D McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure on what basis the Titanic Quarter was selected as the new site for PRONI. (AQW 3690/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: An 'Official Journal of the European Union' (OJEU) competition was launched in October 2006 to secure a developer to provide both a site and build a new Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). The procurement process followed the Restricted Procedure as set out in the Public Contract Regulations 2006, with a pre-qualification stage being followed by a competitive tender. Assessment criteria included site suitability, outline design proposals and site and construction cost.

Following evaluation of the tender submissions, Titanic Quarter Limited (TQL) was determined to be the most economically advantageous in terms of both quality and price.

TQL was subsequently appointed as the preferred bidder in August 2007 and construction of the new record office in Titanic Quarter commenced in November 2008.

Relocation of PRONI

Mr D McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for a detailed synopsis of the events leading to the decision to move PRONI to the Titanic Quarter. (AQW 3728/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The events leading to the decision to move PRONI to the Titanic Quarter are shown in the table below.

Date	Event
April 2005	Business case for new accommodation for PRONI commissioned

Date	Event
November 2005	Minister – David Hanson MP – approved the preferred option to develop a purpose built building, fully compliant with BS5454:2000 (Recommendations for the storage and exhibition of archival documents), with an element of third party storage.
January 2006	DFP Approved the business case.
September 2006	Secretary of State – Peter Hain – approved the finance for the project.
October 2006	The Contract Notice to procure, from a developer, a site and building specifically designed for PRONI was placed in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU).
November 2006	Return date for Pre Qualification Questionnaires (PQQs) from Developers.
April 2007	Following evaluation of the PQQs tender documents issued to 5 shortlisted Developers.
June 2007	Tender submissions returned from 2 Developers
August 2007	Following evaluation of the tender submissions a letter of appointment as preferred bidder was issued to Titanic Quarter Ltd.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

C2K Provision for Schools

Mr J O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to modernise the C2K provision for schools and if the plans include the opportunity to update the system with the latest technology, such as the next generation of internet provision known as 'cloud'. (AQW 1858/10)

Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane): Tá ról lárnach ag úsáid éifeachtach na Teicneolaíochta Eolais agus Cumarsáide sna príomhpholasaithe oideachais ar fad atá á gcur i bhfeidhm ag an Roinn Oideachais, lena n-áirítear an curaclam athbhreithnithe agus an fócas atá againn ar thorthaí oideachais a fheabhsú do gach duine óg. Tá sé ríthábhachtach go bhfaigheann daoine óga na scileanna le Teicneolaíocht Eolais agus Chumarsáide a úsáid go héifeachtach, go muiníneach agus go sábháilte agus go mbíonn rochtain éasca ag ceannairí scoile ar an eolas atá de dhíth orthu le teagasc agus foghlaim a éascú agus lena scoileanna a bhainistiú.

The effective use of ICT plays a central role in all the key education policies being taken forward by the Department of Education, including the revised curriculum and our focus on improving educational outcomes for all young people. Ensuring that young people acquire the skills to use ICT effectively, confidently and safely and that our school leaders have easy access to the information they need to inform teaching and learning and manage their schools are key priorities.

The Classroom 2000 (C2k) service provides every grant-aided school with a modern, connected ICT infrastructure. C2k is a managed ICT service sponsored by the Western Education and Library Board on behalf of the other education and library boards and the Department, and includes:

- networked computers;
- administration and management systems for school staff;
- a high speed managed learning environment called LearningNI; and
- full service support via the C2k help desk..

Since 2000, the Department of Education has invested significantly in the C2k service, making the north an internationally recognised leader in the use of ICT in education. I remain committed to ensuring that schools have the modern ICT infrastructure that they need to reduce unnecessary administration and provide high quality teaching and learning for young people.

A new contract, referred to as Lot 7, designed to update the equipment and networks available to post-primary and special schools will shortly be advertised in the Official Journal of the European Union. Although many of the details will be worked out during the procurement process, Lot 7 will introduce state of the art technology into classrooms. The design for Lot 7 will fully utilise cloud technologies (the cloud is the use of large commercial data centres, not necessarily located locally, that will house data, resources and software that can be accessed

from any location on a range of devices) to make teaching and learning resources more widely available anytime, anywhere, while still being able to provide a safe secure environment for our pupils using these technologies.

The networks and equipment in primary schools were replaced and upgraded in 2007/08.

School Swimming Lessons

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to ensure that all children are taught to swim through their local schools. (AQW 3666/10)

Minister of Education: I believe that it is very important that children have the opportunity to learn to swim and, most importantly, to learn how to be safe in and near water. In recognition of its importance, swimming is a statutory area of Physical Education at Key Stage 2 (Years 5, 6 and 7) and Key Stage 3 (Years 8, 9 and 10). The focus in Key Stage 2 is on helping pupils to develop basic swimming and personal survival skills and on developing their confidence and competence in being able to swim without the use of swimming aids using recognised swimming strokes. In Key Stage 3, pupils should be given opportunities to participate frequently and regularly in a balanced programme of physical activity that specifically includes swimming.

Tá sé de dhualgas ar an scoil agus ar an Bhord Gobharnóirí ábhartha soláthar an churaclaim a bhaint amach i dtaca le híosábhair, le comhairle ar fáil ón Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne áitiúil.

Delivery of the curriculum in terms of meeting the minimum content is a matter for the school and the relevant Board of Governors, with advice available from the local Education and Library Board.

Compulsory School Starting Age

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to deal with the issue of children starting primary school before the compulsory starting age of four years. (AQW 3667/10)

Minister of Education: Éilíonn an reachtaíocht reatha ar an pháiste tús a chur le scoil ag tús na céad scoilbhliana eile, sna cásanna sin nuair a bhaineann sé ceithre bliana d'aois amach idir 1 Meán Fómhair agus 1 Iúil sa scoilbhliain chéanna, nuair atá sé 4 bliana d'aois agus nuair nach bhfuil sé 5 bliana d'aois go fóill.

Current legislation requires that, where a child reaches the age of 4 on or between 1 September and 1 July in the same school year, the child has to start school at the beginning of the following school year, when s/he is 4 but not yet 5 years of age.

The school starting age was reduced from 5 years to 4 years and 2 months under the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989 which also brought in a range of major education reforms including a new statutory curriculum.

The original intention was that P1 would be equivalent to a nursery year but in many schools children in P1 were quickly introduced to the formal curriculum. The introduction of the Foundation Stage in the primary school as part of the revised curriculum is designed to build on children's earlier learning experiences by providing an appropriate play-based learning programme to develop their disposition to learn, and to help to introduce them to more formal learning in a way and at a pace that takes account of their age and level of development.

My Department is aware that a number of primary schools offer reception places for children who are under the starting age of compulsory education. However, one of the aims of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme (PSEEP) was the replacement of reception provision with alternative provision in either the statutory nursery sector or private/voluntary playgroups sector. As a result, the number of reception places has significantly decreased from that prior to the implementation of the PSEEP. In 2008/09 there were only 606 reception places compared with 2600 in 1997/98.

My Department is currently preparing the Early Years (0-6) Strategy, which will be published for consultation early in 2010. The Strategy will consider how this issue will be dealt with in future.

Early Year Places

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to address the issue of children missing out on early year places. (AQW 3668/10)

Minister of Education: Is é is aidhm don Chlár Fairsingithe Oideachais Réamhscoile bliain amháin d'ardchaighdeán cistithe oideachais réamhscoile a sholáthar, sa bhliain roimh oideachas éigeantach, do gach páiste ar mhian lena thuismitheoirí é.

The aim of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme is to provide one year of high quality funded pre-school education, in the year before compulsory education, for every child whose parents wish it.

The Early Years Team in the Department liaises closely with each Education and Library Board's Pre-School Education Advisory Group (PEAG) on an ongoing basis to ensure that shortfalls are identified and dealt with. As a result, in the current school year, funding for over 200 additional places was secured and allocated to the Education and Library Boards in response to identified demand.

The school based projection figure for September 2009 in respect of P1 pupils was 22,861. This would indicate that the pre-school phase overall level of provision is running at 93%. The pre-school phase of education is non compulsory. Research has shown that some 10% of parents do not wish to avail of a pre-school place for their child. However, it should be noted that it is not possible for demand to be geographically exactly matched to supply.

Pupils: Expulsion from School due to Alcohol

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Education how many (i) primary school; and (ii) secondary school pupils were excluded or expelled from school for being under the influence of alcohol on school premises in each of the last five years. (AQW 3673/10)

Minister of Education: Léiríonn an tábla thíos líon na ndaltaí ar cuireadh ar fionraí iad nuair ba é mí-úsáid alcóil an fáth a tugadh don fhionraí. Níl aon sonraí ar fáil áfach, maidir le cé acu a bhí na daltaí a bhí i gceist faoi thionchar an óil ar áitreabh scoile:-

The table below shows the number of pupils suspended where the reason given was alcohol abuse, however no details are available on whether the pupils involved were under the influence of alcohol on school premises:-

School Year	Primary	Post-Primary
2003/04	0	49
2004/05	0	69
2005/06	0	84
2006/07	0	87
2007/08	0	71

Notes:

- Figures include pupils in Key Stage 1-4 at primary and post-primary schools.
- The data refers to the number of pupils suspended. The number of suspensions could be higher since a pupil can be suspended more than once for the same reason.

The following table shows the number of pupils expelled where the reason given was alcohol abuse, however no details are available on whether the pupils involved were under the influence of alcohol on school premises:-

School Year	Primary	Post-Primary
2003/04	0	N/A*
2004/05	0	2
2005/06	0	0
2006/07	0	0
2007/08	0	0

Notes:

- Figures include pupils in Key Stage 1-4 at primary and post-primary schools.

* Reasons for pupil expulsions were first collected in 2003/04, and alcohol abuse was combined with data on substance abuse in that year.

Suspension and expulsion statistics in relation to the 2008/09 school year will be published in the coming weeks.

Availability of Teaching Positions

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Education how many university graduates with qualified teacher status since 2000 have (i) not taken up or (ii) failed to find a teaching position. (AQW 3674/10)

Minister of Education: Níor theagasc 1171 céimí, a bhfuil Stádas Múinteora Cáilithe faighte acu ón bhliain 2000 i leith, i scoileanna deontaschúnta a fhaigheann airgead ón Roinn.

1171 graduates who have obtained Qualified Teaching Status since 2000 have not taught in grant-aided schools paid by the Department.

Educators at Northern Ireland Environment Agency Sites

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Education when her Department was notified of the removal of Educators at Northern Ireland Environment Agency sites; and for her assessment of the decision to remove these Educators. (AQW 3682/10)

Minister of Education: Cuireadh cinneadh Roinn na Timpeallachta in iúl do mo Roinn i mí Mhárta 2009 nach ndéanfaí athnuachan ar chonarthaí na n-Oifigeach Oideachais ar shuíomhanna Ghníomhaireacht na Timpeallachta i ndiaidh 31 Márta 2010. Ag an am sin, chomhairligh Roinn na Timpeallachta gur ghlac sí leis agus í ag déanamh an chinnidh seo go raibh an-mheas ag na scoileanna a ghlac páirt agus a thug cuairt ar pháirceanna agus suímhanna sa scéim, ach nár úsáid ach céatadán beag scoileanna an tseirbhís seo agus, mar gheall ar an easpa éilimh seo, bhain sí de thátal as nach raibh sé indéanta leanúint ar aghaidh leis an tseirbhís

My Department became aware in March 2009 of the Department of the Environment's (DOE) decision not to renew the contracts of Education Officers at Environmental Agency sites after 31 March 2010. At that time the DOE advised that, in taking this decision, it took account of the fact that whilst the education service programme was highly valued by those schools which participated and visited parks and sites, only a very small percentage of schools have availed of this service and, given its limited application to schools, the Environment Agency concluded that it was no longer feasible to continue with the service.

I am conscious that the service provided by the Education Officers is valued by those schools that have visited parks and sites and participated in the education programme, and, while it is disappointing that their contracts are not being extended, I recognise that we all face difficult decisions when it comes to budgets in the current climate. As the employment of Education Officers in the Environment Agency is the responsibility of DOE it would be inappropriate for the Department of Education to intervene.

My focus is on ensuring that children have opportunities to learn about environmental issues and the revised curriculum provides for this. For example environmental issues are included, at primary stage, in The World Around Us (Geography, Science and Technology) and, at post primary stage, in Learning for Life and Work (Local and Global Citizenship, Employability), and Environment and Society (Geography and History) and Science and Technology.

School Uniform Grants

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Education how much her Department has spent on school uniform grants in each of the last three years. (AQW 3687/10)

Minister of Education: Seo a leanas an caiteachas a chaith gach ceann de na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne ar dheontais éide scoile don tréimhse a iarradh:-

The expenditure by each of the Education and Library Boards on school uniform grants for the period requested is detailed below:-

	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10* (1 April – 31 December 2009)
BELB	£480k	£457k	£460k	£687k
NEELB	£218k	£292k	£311k	£511k
SEELB	£274k	£276k	£275k	£419k

	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10* (1 April – 31 December 2009)
SELB	£372k	£357k	£382k	£642k
WELB	£500k	£466k	£476k	£752k
TOTAL	£1,844k	£1,848k	£1,904k	£3,011k

The figures have been supplied by the Education and Library Boards.

* Figures for the period 1 April – 31 December 2009 include expenditure on the new Primary School Uniform Grant which was awarded to eligible pupils for the first time in the 2009/10 academic year.

DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

‘Dark Sky’ Tourism

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if any assessment has been made of the potential for ‘dark sky’ tourism, following the example of Dumfries and Galloway Council. (AQW 3626/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): ‘Dark Sky’ tourism has not been listed as a potential economic driver or a priority for Northern Ireland tourism and no data exists on the current market demand for astronomy based holidays. However, NITB will ensure that it receives any relevant statistics on the impact that the recently established ‘Dark Sky Park’ in Galloway Forest Park has on tourism in the area so that an assessment can be made as to its value, this will help inform future discussion on the subject.

‘Dark Sky’ Tourism

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if any geographical areas have been assessed on the Bortle Scale as being suitable for ‘dark sky’ tourism. (AQW 3627/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has not undertaken any work in this area as it is not within its remit to do so.

‘Dark Sky’ tourism has not been listed as a potential economic driver or a priority for Northern Ireland tourism and no data exists on the current market demand for astronomy based holidays. However, NITB will ensure that it receives any relevant statistics on the impact that the recently established ‘Dark Sky Park’ in Galloway Forest Park has on tourism in the area so that an assessment can be made as to its value to which will help inform future discussion on the subject.

‘Dark Sky’ Areas

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if any geographical areas, particularly remote areas, have been assessed under the Sky Quality Meter scale readings to identify ‘dark sky’ areas. (AQW 3628/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has not undertaken any work in this area as it is not within its remit to do so.

‘Dark Sky’ tourism has not been listed as a potential economic driver or a priority for Northern Ireland tourism and no data exists on the current market demand for astronomy based holidays. However, NITB will ensure that it receives any relevant statistics on the impact that the recently established ‘Dark Sky Park’ in Galloway Forest Park has on tourism in the area so that an assessment can be made as to its value to which will help inform future discussion on the subject.

Tourism

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the measures in place within her Department to manage tourism. (AQW 3629/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) is the lead Department for tourism in Northern Ireland. The Department, under my supervision, delivers its tourism responsibilities through two of its sponsor bodies, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) and Tourism Ireland Ltd (TIL). Targets are set for NITB and TIL via their respective Corporate and Operating Plans and these are monitored by DETI through regular oversight and liaison meetings.

DETI, supported by NITB and TIL, is currently leading on the development of a new Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland which will be issued for public consultation shortly. This Strategy, and its associated action plan, will provide a clear and inspiring vision for the development of Northern Ireland's tourism experience through to the year 2020.

Tourism Opportunities

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what pro-active arrangements are in place within her Department to identify tourism opportunities, as opposed to reacting to initiatives from councils and other local bodies. (AQW 3630/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has responsibility for funding the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) and is co-sponsor of Tourism Ireland Ltd (TIL). Both these organisations are proactive in identifying tourism opportunities, some of which I will detail here.

In December 2009, I launched Tourism Ireland's marketing plans for 2010. TIL will be investing heavily in tactical and co-operative marketing with industry partners to drive a value-for-money message and will focus on getting the best offers to overseas trade and consumers. Stand-alone Northern Ireland campaigns in the marketplace will be implemented and Tourism Ireland will focus on the signature projects, Northern Ireland's spectacular scenery, Belfast as the 'City of Music' and 'Titanic, 100 Years On' to differentiate Northern Ireland from other holiday destinations, and to promote its uniqueness, particularly versus domestic holidays in Great Britain.

The Northern Ireland Tourist board has been engaged in developing a series of business insight papers articulating the evolving demands and interests of today's visitors. Insights produced in 2009 include:

- Getting the most of the short breaks market
- Maximising Northern Ireland's fabulous food
- Maximising the growing interest in learning while on holiday

Planned insights for the first quarter of 2010 include:

- Creating the authentic Northern Ireland visitor experience
- Music tourism

In addition to this NITB has developed a successful Industry Development Programme which aims to motivate tourism practitioners by benchmarking against recognised international experts and learning from local tourism experts. The programme includes a Masterclass series as well as Learning journeys

Alongside this ongoing work, Officials in my Department have been working closely with both these organisations to develop a new Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland due to launch for consultation shortly. This will identify opportunities, providing a clear and inspiring vision for the development of the tourism experience through to 2020.

People Registered as Unemployed

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many people were registered as unemployed in (i) January 2008; and (ii) October 2009. (AQW 3679/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The total number of Claimant Count unemployed persons and the corresponding percentage of the resident working age population in Northern Ireland at January 2008 and October 2009 are shown in the table below.

Sex	January 2008		October 2009	
	number	rate	number	rate
Male	18,733	3.3	40,794	7.2
Female	5,378	1.0	11,940	2.3
Total	24,111	2.2	52,734	4.8

The figures in the above table are not seasonally adjusted.

School Leavers Registered as Unemployed

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment the number of school leavers registered as unemployed (i) in January 2008; (ii) in January 2009; and (iii) at the latest available date. (AQW 3680/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It is not possible to provide the exact information requested, as the Claimant Count does not separately identify 'school leavers'. However for information, the number of Claimant Count unemployed persons aged 16 to 19 and the corresponding percentage of total claimants in Northern Ireland at January 2008, January 2009 and November 2009 are shown in the table below.

Claimant Count for 16 to 19	Male		Female		Total	
	Number of claimants	Percentage of total claimants	Number of claimants	Percentage of total claimants	Number of claimants	Percentage of total claimants
January 2008	1,730	9.3	840	15.8	2,575	10.7
January 2009	2,875	9.2	1,225	15.4	4,100	10.4
November 2009	3,395	8.4	1,500	13.0	4,895	9.4

Note the numbers of claimants in age groups are rounded to the nearest 5, while the total for all ages is not rounded, hence figures may not sum.

Figures in the table are not seasonally adjusted.

Disconnected Gas and Electricity Supplies

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many households have had their (i) gas; and (ii) electricity supplies disconnected because of unpaid bills in each of the last five years. (AQW 3683/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Gas

(i) firmus energy has confirmed that 4 domestic natural gas customers have been disconnected because of unpaid bills within the last five years. Phoenix Supply Limited has informed my Department that it does not record separately the number of disconnections carried out solely as a result of outstanding debt. Phoenix has confirmed that disconnections as a result of outstanding debt are only carried out as a measure of last resort and after the customer has been offered, and refused to accept, an appropriate repayment plan.

Electricity

(ii) NIE Energy has advised that no domestic electricity customers have been disconnected because of unpaid bills within the last five years.

The companies which supply natural gas and electricity to households in Northern Ireland offer a number of measures to assist domestic customers in managing the cost and payment of their energy bills including pre-payment meters. Each of the companies also has robust procedures in place to ensure that disconnection is a last resort in settling unpaid bills.

Absence of Road Gritting

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if her Department can provide an estimate of the cost to the local economy of the disruption to business due to the absence of gritting on some roads and the associated absenteeism from the workplace. (AQW 3686/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Apart from illness, official current industry surveys do not record reasons for workplace absenteeism. It is not possible, therefore, to quantify or estimate any economic loss arising from roads not being gritted.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Pricewaterhousecooper Report

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the assumption that none of the options identified in the Pricewaterhousecooper Report require an equality impact assessment. (AQW 3594/10)

Minister of the Environment (Mr E Poots): Under the original Key Outputs and Requirements of the Assessment of the Options for Local Government Service Delivery, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) were required to conduct relevant equality/regulatory/rural impact screening analyses on their proposals and recommendations.

However, I can confirm, that following engagement between the consultants and the project's Steering Groups (which consisted of central government and local government representatives) it was agreed that none of the proposals contained in the Economic Appraisal require further Equality Impact Assessment in addition to that which supported the Minister's decision to create 11 new councils in Northern Ireland.

Nevertheless, I support the view that at the next stage, i.e. detailed design, which will consider and recommend specific configuration options; that this phase will require further consideration of the need for an Equality Impact Assessment to be conducted. Those stakeholders who responded as part of the recent engagement process (including NILGA, SOLACE and LGSC) endorsed this approach.

Belfast International Airport Car Parks

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any correspondence he and his predecessors have received from Belfast International Airport about car parks operating without planning permission in the vicinity of the airport. (AQW 3611/10)

Minister of the Environment: There has been no correspondence from Belfast International Airport (BIA) to me or my predecessors. However, the Ballymena Divisional Planning Office has received 7 items of correspondence (1 in 2005, 5 in 2007 and 1 in 2009) from BIA drawing attention to alleged unauthorised car parks in the vicinity of the airport and asking for updates on enforcement action in relation to these.

Belfast International Airport Car Parks

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment if he is aware of any car parks which have been established in green belt areas in the vicinity of Belfast International Airport without planning permission. (AQW 3612/10)

Minister of the Environment: The Department has been aware of 11 unauthorised car park sites in the vicinity of the airport. Of these 11 sites, 1 is lawful having been deemed to be immune from enforcement action by the Planning Appeals Commission, others have been closed as a result of enforcement action by Planning Service, while the remainder are at various stages of enforcement proceedings.

Belfast International Airport Car Parks

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department intends to take to shut down car parks in the vicinity of Belfast International Airport which do not have planning permission. (AQW 3613/10)

Minister of the Environment:

- My Department responds promptly to any breaches identified and Planning Service continues to take formal action as necessary against unauthorised car parks in this area. Recent planning appeal results have supported the Planning Service's view that this use is not acceptable in the rural area.
- As a result of enforcement action, 6 unauthorised car parks in the vicinity of the International Airport have ceased operations. One operator has been before the courts on 3 occasions, amassing a total of £40,000 in fines. The remainder are at various stages of enforcement action and investigations.

Educators at Northern Ireland Environment Agency Sites

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment when the removal of Educators at Northern Ireland Environment Agency sites will be implemented. (AQW 3643/10)

Minister of the Environment: The contracts of the agency staff currently providing an education service at NIEA sites will not be renewed after 31 March 2010.

Educators at Northern Ireland Environment Agency Sites

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment the estimated amount his Department will save each year following the removal of Educators at Northern Ireland Environment Agency sites. (AQW 3644/10)

Minister of the Environment: The estimated amount saved will be £260k per annum.

Educators at Northern Ireland Environment Agency Sites

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment if he intends to discuss the removal of Educators at Northern Ireland Environment Agency sites with any interested parties, including Ministers or officials of other Departments, in the future. (AQW 3646/10)

Minister of the Environment: Officials from my Department and the Department of Education have corresponded on this matter and will be meeting shortly to discuss this matter further.

Educators at Northern Ireland Environment Agency Sites

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions he or his predecessors have had with other Ministers and Departments about the removal of Educators at Northern Ireland Environment Agency sites. (AQW 3647/10)

Minister of the Environment: Officials from my Department and the Department of Education have corresponded on this matter and will be meeting shortly to discuss this matter further.

Educators at Northern Ireland Environment Agency Sites

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment how many children in each Education and Library Board have visited Educators at Northern Ireland Environment Agency sites, in each of the last three years. (AQW 3648/10)

Minister of the Environment: The number of children from schools in each of the Education and Library Boards visiting NIEA Educators is set out in the table below:-

	2007	2008	2009	Total
BELB	4103	5768	5727	15598
NEELB	4278	6043	6271	16592
SEELB	2747	4285	4366	11398
SELB	3736	5770	3600	13106
WELB	4052	4526	3838	12416
Total	18916	26392	23802	69110

Sprucefield: Planning Application

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment why the Article 31 for Sprucefield has been allowed to continue when the necessary information was not submitted in time. (AQW 3753/10)

Minister of the Environment: Processing of the planning application submitted on 28 August 2008 for Phase II retail development at Sprucefield has not continued.

It may be helpful if I explain that Under the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999, as amended, the Planning Service requested further environmental information on 2 December 2008. The addendum was received outside the 3 month time limit as required by the legislation. The Department's view is that the 2008 application is a deemed refusal and processing of this application has therefore ceased.

The applicant submitted a duplicate application on 26 November 2009. Following consideration of this application the Planning Service recommended that it should proceed by means of a public inquiry. I agreed with this recommendation and the application has been referred to the Planning Appeals Commission.

DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Deprived Areas

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to list (i) the highest 10%; and (ii) the next 11% to 20% most deprived areas in Northern Ireland as defined by the 2001 Noble indices. (AQW 3605/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2001 was reported for 566 Electoral Wards where rank 1 is the most deprived ward and rank 566 is the least deprived ward.

The 10% most deprived wards (those ranked 1 to 56 in terms of multiple deprivation in 2001) and the 11% to 20% most deprived wards (those ranked 57 to 113 in terms of multiple deprivation in 2001) are shown in the tables (i) and (ii) below.

The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2005 was reported for 890 Super Output Areas where rank 1 is the most deprived Super Output Area and rank 890 is the least deprived Super Output Area.

The 10% most deprived Super Output Areas (those ranked 1 to 89 in terms of multiple deprivation in 2005) and the 11% to 20% most deprived Super Output Areas (those ranked 90 to 178 in terms of multiple deprivation in 2005) are shown in the tables (iii) and (iv) below.

- (i) The 10% most deprived wards in Northern Ireland as defined by the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2001

Rank (1 = most deprived)	Ward*	LGD*	Rank	Ward*	LGD*
1	Crumlin	Belfast	29	Beechmount	Belfast
2	Falls	Belfast	30	Glentaisie	Moyle
3	Whiterock	Belfast	31	Westland	Derry
4	St. Annes	Belfast	32	Blackstaff	Belfast
5	Ballymacarrett	Belfast	33	Daisy Hill	Newry and Mourne
6	Brandywell	Derry	34	Castlederg	Strabane
7	Woodvale	Belfast	35	Glencairn	Belfast
8	New Lodge	Belfast	36	Bushmills	Moyle
9	The Mount	Belfast	37	Island	Belfast
10	Shankill	Belfast	38	Collin Glen	Lisburn
11	Upper Springfield	Belfast	39	Termon	Omagh
12	Ardoyne	Belfast	40	Ballybot	Newry and Mourne
13	Creggan South	Derry	41	Court	Craigavon
14	Shaftesbury	Belfast	42	Glen	Derry
15	The Diamond	Derry	43	Rosemount	Derry
16	Water Works	Belfast	44	Fintona	Omagh
17	St. Peter's	Derry	45	Drumgask	Craigavon
18	Victoria	Derry	46	Ballysally	Coleraine
19	Duncairn	Belfast	47	Crossmaglen	Newry and Mourne
20	Clonard	Belfast	48	Glencolin	Belfast
21	East	Strabane	49	Carn Hill	Derry
22	Creggan Central	Derry	50	Drumgor	Craigavon
23	Shantallow East	Derry	51	Callan Bridge	Armagh
24	Binevenagh	Limavady	52	Beechwood	Derry
25	Flying Horse	Down	53	Tullycarnet	Castlereagh
26	Woodstock	Belfast	54	Churchland	Coleraine
27	Shantallow West	Derry	55	Ballykeel	Ballymena
28	Twinbrook	Lisburn	56	Braden	Newtownabbey

* 1984 Ward and Local Government Districts Boundaries

(ii) The 11% to 20% most deprived wards in Northern Ireland as defined by the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2001

Rank	Ward*	LGD*	Rank	Ward*	LGD*
57	Glenderg	Strabane	85	West	Strabane
58	Corrody	Derry	86	Legoniel	Belfast
59	St. Patrick's	Newry and Mourne	87	Derrymore	Newry and Mourne
60	Dunanney	Newtownabbey	88	Caw	Derry
61	West Winds	Ards	89	Knocklayd	Moyle
62	Coolessan	Limavady	90	Coole	Newtownabbey
63	Ardboe	Cookstown	91	Cross Glebe	Coleraine
64	Ballee	Ballymena	92	Plumbridge	Strabane
65	Strand	Derry	93	Drumgullion	Newry and Mourne
66	Creggan	Newry and Mourne	94	Victoria Bridge	Strabane
67	Ballysaggart	Dungannon	95	Tullygally	Craigavon
68	Pomeroy	Cookstown	96	Sixmilecross	Omagh
69	Rathenraw	Antrim	97	Drumnamoe	Craigavon
70	Corcrain	Craigavon	98	South	Strabane
71	Glen Road	Belfast	99	Falls Park	Belfast
72	Clare	Strabane	100	Fair Green	Ballymena
73	Owenkillew	Omagh	101	Camrough	Newry and Mourne
74	Armoy	Moyle	102	Abbey Park	Armagh
75	Kilwee	Lisburn	103	St. Mary's	Newry and Mourne
76	Highfield	Belfast	104	Coalisland South	Dungannon
77	Newtownstewart	Strabane	105	Northland	Carrickfergus
78	Church	Craigavon	106	Whitehouse	Newtownabbey
79	Central	Larne	107	Downs	Armagh
80	Sion Mills	Strabane	108	Newhill	Ballymoney
81	Botanic	Belfast	109	Gortalee	Carrickfergus
82	Ballysillan	Belfast	110	Bonamargy & Rathlin	Moyle
83	Dunnamanagh	Strabane	111	Dunnamore	Cookstown
84	Old Warren	Lisburn	112	Newtownhamilton	Newry and Mourne
			113	Sunnylands	Carrickfergus

* 1984 Ward and Local Government Districts Boundaries

(iii) The 10% most deprived wards in Northern Ireland as defined by the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2005

Rank	Super Output Area	LGD*	Rank	Super Output Area	LGD*
1	Whiterock_2	Belfast	45	Collin Glen_2	Lisburn
2	Shankill_2	Belfast	46	Westland	Derry
3	Falls_2	Belfast	47	Clonard_2	Belfast
4	Crumlin_2_Belfast	Belfast	48	Island_1	Belfast
5	Whiterock_3	Belfast	49	Shaftesbury_2	Belfast
6	Falls_3	Belfast	50	Water Works_2	Belfast
7	Shankill_1	Belfast	51	Twinbrook_2	Lisburn
8	New Lodge_2	Belfast	52	Culmore_2	Derry
9	New Lodge_1	Belfast	53	Shantallow East	Derry
10	Ballymacarrett_3	Belfast	54	Water Works_3	Belfast
11	Creggan Central_1	Derry	55	Creggan Central_2	Derry
12	Upper Springfield_3	Belfast	56	Twinbrook_1	Lisburn
13	Ardoyne_3	Belfast	57	Legoniel_1	Belfast
14	Falls_1	Belfast	58	Woodvale_1	Belfast
15	New Lodge_3	Belfast	59	Blackstaff_2	Belfast
16	Brandywell	Derry	60	Glencolin_2	Belfast
17	Duncairn_1	Belfast	61	Beechmount_2	Belfast
18	Woodvale_3	Belfast	62	The Mount_2	Belfast
19	Crumlin_1_Belfast	Belfast	63	Drumnamoe_1	Craigavon
20	Ardoyne_2	Belfast	64	Woodstock_2	Belfast
21	The Mount_1	Belfast	65	Corcrair_2	Craigavon
22	Water Works_1	Belfast	66	Crossmaglen	Newry & Mourne
23	Upper Springfield_2	Belfast	67	Clondermot_1	Derry
24	Shantallow West_2	Derry	68	Carn Hill_2	Derry
25	Crevagh_2	Derry	69	Glen Road_2	Belfast
26	East	Strabane	70	Altnagelvin_1	Derry
27	Ballymacarrett_1	Belfast	71	Ballycolman	Strabane
28	Ardoyne_1	Belfast	72	Beechmount_3	Belfast
29	Upper Springfield_1	Belfast	73	Shaftesbury_3	Belfast
30	Strand_1_Derry	Derry	74	Drumgor_2	Craigavon
31	Whiterock_1	Belfast	75	Drumgullion_1	Newry & Mourne
32	Shantallow West_1	Derry	76	Cliftonville_3	Belfast
33	Glencairn_1	Belfast	77	Dunanney	Newtownabbey
34	Clonard_1	Belfast	78	Greystone_Limavady	Limavady
35	Creggan South	Derry	79	Glenderg	Strabane
36	The Diamond	Derry	80	Ebrington_2	Derry
37	Ballymacarrett_2	Belfast	81	Ballysally_1	Coleraine
38	Collin Glen_3	Lisburn	82	Glen Road_1	Belfast

Rank	Super Output Area	LGD*	Rank	Super Output Area	LGD*
39	Glencolin_4	Belfast	83	Beechwood	Derry
40	Shaftesbury_1	Belfast	84	Collin Glen_1	Lisburn
41	Drumgask_2	Craigavon	85	Botanic_5	Belfast
42	Highfield_3	Belfast	86	Ballybot	Newry & Mourne
43	Woodvale_2	Belfast	87	Court_1	Craigavon
44	Duncairn_2	Belfast	88	Ballymote	Down
			89	Victoria_Derry	Derry

* 1992 Local Government Boundaries

(iv) The 11 to 20% most deprived Super Output Areas in Northern Ireland as defined by the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2005

Rank	Super Output Area	LGD*	Rank	Super Output Area	LGD*
90	Glen Road_3	Belfast	134	Upper Malone_2	Belfast
91	Ladybrook_3	Belfast	135	Beechmount_1	Belfast
92	Ballysillan_1	Belfast	136	Cross Glebe	Coleraine
93	Devenish	Fermanagh	137	Ballee	Ballymena
94	Poleglass_1	Lisburn	138	Annagh_2	Craigavon
95	Castlederg	Strabane	139	Carn Hill_1	Derry
96	Enagh_1_Derry	Derry	140	Clare	Strabane
97	Coole	Newtownabbey	141	Andersonstown_3	Belfast
98	Coalisland South	Dungannon	142	Falls Park_1	Belfast
99	Blackstaff_1	Belfast	143	Springtown_1	Derry
100	Chichester Park_1	Belfast	144	Conlig_3	North Down
101	Coolessan	Limavady	145	Tullycarnet	Castlereagh
102	Kilwee_2	Lisburn	146	Daisy hill_2	Newry & Mourne
103	Valley_2	Newtownabbey	147	Bessbrook	Newry & Mourne
104	Daisy hill_1	Newry & Mourne	148	Derrymore_1	Newry & Mourne
105	Lisanelly_2	Omagh	149	South_1	Strabane
106	Northland	Carrickfergus	150	Ballykeel	Ballymena
107	Monkstown_1	Newtownabbey	151	Silver Bridge_1	Newry & Mourne
108	Glencolin_3	Belfast	152	Springfarm_2	Antrim
109	Enagh_2_Limavady	Limavady	153	Finn	Strabane
110	Newtownstewart	Strabane	154	Churchland	Coleraine
111	Rosemount	Derry	155	Culmore_3	Derry
112	Woodstock_3	Belfast	156	Castleview_1	Belfast
113	Glencairn_2	Belfast	157	Clonallan_1	Newry & Mourne
114	Bloomfield_1_Belfast	Belfast	158	Rosslea	Fermanagh
115	Andersonstown_2	Belfast	159	Ballyloran	Larne
116	Legoniel_2	Belfast	160	Scrabo_2	Ards
117	Old Warren	Lisburn	161	Ballynashallog_1	Derry

Rank	Super Output Area	LGD*	Rank	Super Output Area	LGD*
118	Woodville_1	Craigavon	162	Ardboe	Cookstown
119	Drumgask_1	Craigavon	163	Highfield_2	Belfast
120	Farranshane	Antrim	164	Love Lane	Carrickfergus
121	Cliftonville_1	Belfast	165	Mossley_2	Newtownabbey
122	Foyle Springs_2	Derry	166	Sydenham_1	Belfast
123	Ballysaggart	Dungannon	167	Taghnevan	Craigavon
124	Corcrain_1	Craigavon	168	Dunnamanagh	Strabane
125	Whitehouse	Newtownabbey	169	Kilkeel Central_2	Newry & Mourne
126	West_2	Strabane	170	Harbour_1	North Down
127	Creggan	Newry & Mourne	171	Shantallow West_3	Derry
128	Callan Bridge	Armagh	172	Ladybrook_2	Belfast
129	Woodstock_1	Belfast	173	Dunnamore	Cookstown
130	Court_2	Craigavon	174	Crevagh_3	Derry
131	Church	Craigavon	175	Hillhall_1	Lisburn
132	Falls Park_3	Belfast	176	St Mary's	Newry & Mourne
133	Island_2	Belfast	177	St Patrick's_2	Newry & Mourne
			178	Tavanagh	Craigavon

* 1992 Local Government Boundaries

Relocation of Public Sector Jobs

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) what discussions he has had with the Executive about the decentralisation of public sector jobs; and (ii) what plans there are for 2010 regarding the re-location of public sector jobs. (AQW 3656/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: I wrote to Executive colleagues on 30 September 2009 saying that I was keen to have an early Executive discussion on the report on policy on location of public sector jobs. I subsequently mentioned the issue at an Executive meeting on 8 October. To date the matter has not been scheduled for the Executive agenda.

Any decisions on the way forward regarding the report on location will be a matter for the Executive.

Bain Report on the Relocation of Public Sector Jobs

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will implement the proposals of the Bain report in relation to the re-location of public sector jobs. (AQW 3657/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The report on the location of public sector jobs indicated that the cost to the public purse to implement the recommendations could be around £40m. It also suggested that normal value for money considerations should be set aside.

As Finance Minister I have a responsibility to the Assembly and the taxpayers of Northern Ireland to ensure that the pressures on public spending are addressed in a realistic and effective way. Hence I am of the view that in the current economic climate and, with the significant pressures on public spending, it is not affordable to proceed to implement the recommendations of the Report, nor is this the time to set aside normal value for money principles.

However, decisions on a way forward are a matter for the Executive and I am keen, therefore for a discussion with Executive colleagues about this important matter.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Health and Social Care Trusts: Equality Impact Assessments

Mr F Molloy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how his Department applies Equality Impact Assessments to the budget allocations and proposed efficiency savings of Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQO 537/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): I have done everything in my power to further equality in the allocation of budgets. Individual CSR bids made by the Department were subject to high level equality impact assessments. Trusts carried out screening on their efficiency proposals and carried out full Equality Impact Assessments on those that needed it. Myself and the Trusts met with the Unions and many other Stakeholders in the course of this process.

But fundamentally, there was nothing equal about imposing a blunt 3% CSR efficiency plan on all departments. No final unified equality impact assessment of the efficiencies was shown to the Executive before they made their decision.

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust: Hospital Acquired Infections

Ms C Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the discussions he has had with the Chief Executive of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust in relation to the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority's report on hospital acquired infections. (AQO 538/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The unannounced hygiene inspections of hospitals are one of a range of measure that I have taken to address the issue of healthcare-associated infections. MRSA and C. difficile infections have come down by over 30% in the past 18 months.

Following the publication of the RQIA's overview report, I have set up a senior regional team to continue to drive up hygiene and cleanliness standards across all hospitals and healthcare facilities, and to monitor rigorously the implementation of the actions that are required in response to the inspections. This team will report to me. I am also providing funding for a "back to basics" environmental cleaning pilot scheme in Belfast City Hospital.

I have written to the Chairs and Chief Executives of all Trusts emphasising that they must give the highest priority to hygiene and cleanliness issues.

Bamford Review

Dr S Farry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the implementation of the recommendations of the Bamford Review. (AQO 539/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I published an Action Plan for 2009-2011 in October 2009. This followed consultation in 2008 on Delivering the Bamford Vision, which was the Executive's response to the Bamford Review.

I chair an inter-Departmental Ministerial Group on Mental Health and Learning Disability, which will co-ordinate and drive forward the actions committed to across Departments. The HSC Mental Health and Learning Disability Task Force will drive forward action within the HSC.

The actions committed to in the Action Plan are achievable within funding levels agreed as part of the CSR. Any reduction in these funding levels in 2010-11 as a result of the Executive's review of the 2010-11 spending plans will undoubtedly severely limit my Department's ability to deliver on these actions.

Business Services Organisation

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will ensure that the proposed Business Services Organisation will not have an adverse impact on employment levels in the Southern

area, in particular Armagh City; and whether the St Luke's / Longstone site will be considered as a location for its headquarters. (AQO 540/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Business Services Organisation is currently conducting a consultation exercise on proposals to realign and locate those legacy Board functions which became part of its organisation on 1 April 2009, these include legacy board staff located in the Southern area. No decision will be made on the relocation of legacy board staff until the consultation process has concluded and its findings considered. As the outcome of the process is not yet known I can give no assurance on the future levels of staff at this time.

I also announced in February 2009 that the permanent Head quarters of the Business Service Organisation would be sited outside Belfast. Work will begin in the near future to identify options for the location of the future Headquarters, which will consider potential sites available across Northern Ireland.

McElhill Family Tragedy

Mrs C McGill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he has any plans to set up a public inquiry into the McElhill family tragedy. (AQO 541/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My priority is the protection of children and I seek to assure myself and the public that all of the recommendations of the Toner Review have been fully implemented in the WHSCT. I have therefore asked Mr Henry Toner QC to revisit the Western Health and Social Care Trust (WHSCT) to ascertain the extent to which recommendations contained in the Toner report published 1 July 2008, have been implemented.

The issue of a public inquiry would not be for me alone to decide and for my part I would not support a public inquiry unless I genuinely believed it would reveal information not previously known.

Child Protection

Mr M Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the all-island child protection measures currently in place. (AQO 542/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Authorities in both jurisdictions co-operate on an ongoing basis in dealing with individual child protection cases. You will appreciate that the legislation and policies in both jurisdictions are significantly different and any changes to these areas are a matter for Ministers in the relevant jurisdiction. However, under the auspices of the North South Ministerial Council cross-border groups of officials continue to meet on a regular basis to examine areas of mutual co-operation on a range of issues including child protection.

Work is underway to finalise a range of cross-border protocols, advice and guidance as well as to look at areas of co-operation, such as research, internet safety and monitoring of the workforce. It is planned to have some of this material finalised early this year.

Cardiac Surgery

Mr B Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of cardiac surgery provision. (AQO 543/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A highly dedicated team of cardiac surgeons at the Royal Group of Hospitals carry out all cardiac surgery in Northern Ireland. All patients should receive treatment within 13 weeks. Towards the end of 2009, around £20m was released to allow Trusts to work towards the elective care standards for all specialties, including cardiac surgery, making use, where necessary, of the independent sector.

The RGH currently has capacity for between 950 and 1,100 cardiac surgery cases per annum. However, in the period April 2009 - March 2010, demand will be for an estimated 1,250 cases, with approximately 300 cases transferred to the independent sector. Plans are being developed to increase cardiac surgery capacity (physical accommodation and staffing) to cope with the ever-increasing demand, so that Northern Ireland is self-sufficient

in the provision of cardiac surgery by 2012/2013. The success of these plans will of course be dependent on the availability of the necessary additional funding.

Learning Disabilities

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the arrangements for discharging people with learning disabilities into community settings. (AQO 544/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The process of resettling patients is a complex one, involving both community and hospital multi-disciplinary teams. A patient is identified for resettlement only when it is clinically appropriate and it is clear that their needs can be met and their lives could be bettered by the placement. Each placement is a bespoke design around the individual's needs.

The needs of those individuals are assessed by hospital and community staff working together with patients and families/carers, as appropriate using well established protocols.

Every person due to be discharged from a learning disability hospital will participate in the development of a person-centred discharge plan which details the wishes and needs of the individual and how their plan will be managed in their new home.

HIV/AIDS Patients

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what support services are available to assist people diagnosed with HIV and Aids. (AQO 546/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A specialist clinic at the Royal Victoria Hospital provides ongoing treatment and support for people diagnosed with HIV/AIDs. In addition a wide variety of support services are available to people diagnosed with HIV and AIDS through voluntary organisations funded by my Department. These services include: one-to-one support, counselling, complementary therapies, health promotion and healthy living seminars, group support, information services, home support service, respite, residential, social events, education and prevention, training, and advocacy services.

DEPARTMENT FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Emergency Helplines

Mr T Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development how many emergency helplines Roads Service operated over the Christmas and New Year period and to detail the number and nature of the calls received. (AQW 3618/10)

Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): My Department's Roads Service has advised that it had 18 emergency helplines in operation during the Christmas and New Year period and that over 6,000 telephone calls were received by Roads Service over the holiday period. I am also advised that approximately 90% of these calls were in relation to problems arising as a result of the adverse weather conditions, including snow, icy roads and the provision / filling of salt boxes. The remaining telephone calls related to potholes, traffic management / lights, street lighting, etc.

In addition to updating its traffic telephone information line to detail the prevailing traffic conditions, Roads Service's Traffic Information Control Centre dealt with almost 170 telephone calls during the holiday period.

Airport Railway Links

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development what visits, studies, or meetings have taken place involving his departmental officials investigating airport railway links in the past five years. (AQW 3652/10)

Minister for Regional Development: In 2006 my Department established a Steering Group to consider options for future train services here. As well as DRD officials, there was representation from the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Strategic Investment Board, the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company, Translink and the Department of Transport in Dublin. The group considered an Economic Appraisal which examined various options for improvements to the railways network and as a result substantial investment is being made to fund several projects including the purchase of 20 new trains. An option to re-open the Antrim to Knockmore line, which would be necessary to establish rail links to Belfast International Airport, was considered in the appraisal but concluded that such a project did not demonstrate Value for Money.

I met with the Kilbride Community Railways Group in March 2009 and discussed their proposals to have the Antrim to Knockmore railway line re-opened in order to provide new commuter services. Given the proximity of Belfast International Airport to the line they argued for a feasibility study developing a halt or station at the airport. I indicated that if they secured local council support for a study DRD would also contribute to the cost. There has been no further contact since.

My Department commissioned a Study which was completed at the end of 2009 into the possible long term social, physical and economic developments which could be achieved through the enhancement of the Northern Railways Corridor. The report discussed the opportunity to develop rail links to airports. However, it concluded that the costs of developing the Knockmore to Antrim line (which would need to be diverted to link to the airport), or the costs of diverting the line from Templepatrick to the airport would be very high and there would need to be a significant increase in passenger numbers to justify such expenditure. With regards to the City of Derry Airport (CODA), the possible location of the passing loop near to Foyle Bridge may mean, from an operational point of view, a railway halt at CODA would not be feasible. The costs of this, in any case is projected as high because the line would have to be re-aligned.

As part of the development of a Strategic Outline Case for Rapid Transit in the Belfast Metropolitan Area, a high level review was undertaken for a possible extension to George Best Belfast City Airport along the route identified in the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan / draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan considering both Bus Rapid Transit and Light Rail options. The review concluded that the scheme would not be economically viable given existing passenger numbers.

The ongoing reviews of the Regional Development Strategy and the Regional Transportation Strategy Review both acknowledge the importance of good connections to the airports and will set a long term context for such proposals to be kept under review.

NI Water and Roads Service

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will initiate a review of how NI Water and Roads Service responded to interrupted water supplies and dangerous road conditions caused by freezing temperatures over the Christmas and New Year period. (AQW 3659/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I can advise the Member that I convened a review meeting with my Department's Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water (NIW) last week.

As with all such significant weather events, Roads Service will examine the effectiveness of its response and take on board any lessons learned, which could be implemented to improve the service in future years.

I have been advised by NIW, that its Winter Contingency Plan is reviewed annually in advance of the winter period and a series of pre-emptive actions are implemented to mitigate any potential adverse weather situations that may occur.

Grit Piles and Salt Boxes

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will locate grit piles and salt boxes in more rural and urban areas in the future to allow local communities to play their part in keeping winter traffic on the move in freezing weather conditions. (AQW 3661/10)

Minister for Regional Development: You may be aware that a review of the winter service policy and procedures, operated by my Department's Roads Service, was carried out in 2001. One of the key outcomes of

the review, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, was that the practice of targeting the limited resources available for this service on the busier main through routes should continue.

At the time of the review, it was also agreed that on roads maintained by Roads Service, which do not qualify for inclusion onto the gritting schedule, salt bins or grit piles may be provided for use by the public, on a self help basis. Providing the necessary criteria are met, there are no limits placed on the number of salt bins which may be provided, although they will not normally be provided within 100m of another bin.

Roads Service already commits significant resources to maintain approximately 3,500 salt bins provided on public roads.

Traffic Calming Schemes

Dr S Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development what thresholds of community support are used to determine whether to proceed with traffic calming schemes. (AQW 3685/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that proposed traffic calming schemes must have the support of the majority of the local residents and affected organisations.

Roads Service implements traffic calming schemes in accordance with the Roads Service Policy and Procedure Guide E027 "Road Safety Engineering Procedures", which highlights the objectives of the procedure and the consultation process.

The first phase of the consultation process is informal, whereby Roads Service will do a letter drop or undertake a survey, to advise residents of the proposals and gauge the level of public support for such a scheme. Roads Service will consider all representations at this stage and, if necessary, make changes to the scheme design.

The second phase of the consultation process is the formal phase, where residents are given the opportunity to view a detailed map or plan of the area outlining the proposed scheme. For larger, more complex schemes, it may be appropriate to meet with local residents' groups and/or hold public exhibitions.

Roads Service will consider any objection to a scheme on an individual basis, and where possible, will negotiate to resolve any disagreement. However, if an objection remains unresolved, Roads Service will consider the matter in full and may decide to either:

- proceed with the scheme without recourse to a public inquiry;
- hold a public enquiry; or
- abandon the scheme.

I can advise that objections to any scheme are taken seriously and considered on an individual basis, although it must be acknowledged that the overriding priority is Road Safety.

Easibus Service in Bangor

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development when Bloomfield Shopping Centre withdrew funding for the Easy Bus service in Bangor. (AQW 3710/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink has advised me that tenants of Bloomfield Shopping Centre withdrew financial support for Easibus services in Bangor in January 2005.

Grit Boxes

Mrs C Hanna asked the Minister for Regional Development how many grit boxes are currently in operation. (AQW 3774/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it maintains approximately 3,500 salt bins on public roads across the North.

Belfast Sewers Project

Mr P Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress is being made by NI Water on the Belfast Sewer Project, and when it will be operational. (AQO 553/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the Belfast Sewers Project is progressing on programme and final testing and commissioning is expected to commence in February 2010.

Footpaths

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the merits of salting footpaths in town centres and pedestrian precincts during periods of freezing temperatures; and what is the potential liability to traders who clear footpaths of ice and snow from the front of their premises. (AQO 554/10)

Minister for Regional Development: There is no statutory duty on my Department's Roads Service to salt or clear snow and ice from footways.

The Member may recall that the whole issue of winter service, including treatment of footways, was reviewed and subsequently debated by the Assembly in July 2001. At that time it was recognised that the cost of salting footways was prohibitive and that the basic logistics of introducing such a service, which is largely a manual task, make it impractical.

However, following the 2001 Review, the then Minister proposed that, in periods of prolonged lying snow, he would be seeking to enlist the help of other agencies, such as district councils to assist in clearing busy town centre footways.

It was in this context that he wrote to each council outlining proposals for partnering arrangements for the removal of snow and ice from town centre footways and pedestrian areas. Roads Service followed up this initial contact by writing to each council to explain the proposals in detail and enclosing a proposed model agreement.

In consultation with Northern Ireland Local Government Association Roads Service drew up a draft legal agreement. However, only a small number of councils signed up to the agreement and, as such, the resources available to treat snow and ice on footways are somewhat limited.

With regard to the potential liability to traders who clear footways of ice and snow from the front of their premises, the Department can only clarify that liability may potentially arise if clearance actions negligently create traps, hazards or obstructions on footways or the adjoining carriageway for passing pedestrians or motorists. Individual traders would need to consider their own particular situations and proposed actions in conjunction with their own legal advice.

Rural Public Transport

Mrs M O'Neill asked the Minister for Regional Development what action his Department is taking to maximise social mobility and to reduce isolation in rural communities through the provision of public transport. (AQO 555/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Under the Rural Transport Fund, which has a primary objective of reducing social exclusion in rural areas by improving or providing new transport opportunities for people with reduced mobility, my department currently provides support to 16 Rural Community Transport Partnerships to offer a range of specialised services to their members. These services complement the existing conventional public transport and provide transport opportunities for people with reduced mobility living in rural areas throughout the North.

Following a review of the Fund, my Department introduced a voucher based scheme in April 2009 which now allows groups of 16 or more members to avail of RTF services previously unavailable due to the limited carrying capacity of partnerships' vehicles. In addition new Dial-A-Lift and Assisted Rural Travel Pilot Schemes were introduced on 1 December 2009. The Dial-A-Lift scheme aims to ensure that transport services supported by the RTF and provided by the partnerships are made available to individual rural dwellers who need them most. The Assisted Rural Travel Scheme has been introduced as a pilot scheme, until March 2011, with the assistance of the

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The scheme allows individual members of the partnerships who hold valid Smart Passes to travel free or for half fare on Dial a Lift services.

My department also supports Translink to maintain a network of rural routes across the North that would otherwise be uneconomic to run.

Regional Development Strategy: Airports

Mr M McLaughlin asked the Minister for Regional Development the extent to which local airports will feature as economic gateways in the revised Regional Development Strategy. (AQO 556/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department recognises the importance of local airports as economic gateways for regional development. In reviewing the Regional Development Strategy I am giving consideration to the way in which all our gateways can contribute to economic growth. It will also be important to consider the connections to and from them.

Public Transport Reform

Mr J O'Dowd asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on his Department's consultation on the Reform of Public Transport, and to outline the key proposals. (AQO 557/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's consultation on the reform of public transport was launched on 9 November 2009 and will conclude on 5 February 2010. As part of the consultation process, my Department is holding eleven public meetings across the North. Five of these meetings took place in December and a further six are to take place in January.

The main proposal of the reform is the establishment of a public transport agency within the Department for Regional Development. The agency would be responsible for designing and managing public transport services and securing their provision from public transport operators, including Translink. In addition, the agency would regulate public transport, including fares, and control public transport service permits. It would designate bus and rail stations as shared facilities so that they can be used by the passengers of all licensed operators. The agency would also develop and agree local transport plans in consultation with the planned new local authorities.

Easibus Service, Bangor

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made in reconsidering the provision of an Easibus service for Bangor. (AQO 558/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I understand that of the two buses currently operating, one bus will be withdrawn on 1 February 2010 and the other will continue to operate Easibus services by serving two routes on three days per week and the other two routes on the remaining two days per week. However, from the end of June when the Department's funding ends, all Easibus services will cease.

Translink has informed me that it will continue to look at its services to see whether changes could be made to mitigate the effects of the Easibus withdrawal.

A5 Dual Carriageway: Socio-economic Benefits

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the expected socio-economic benefits of the A5 project, apart from the road itself. (AQO 559/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The socio-economic benefits expected of the proposed A5 Western Transport Corridor project include: the bypassing of towns and villages, improved and more reliable journey times and safer roads. In turn, this will assist the operation and development of existing businesses, and make local areas more attractive for inward investment.

Based on my Department's Roads Service's current traffic models, which are to be refined later this year, it is expected that these benefits will accrue over £1.1 billion to the economy, over the standard 60 year assessment

period. It is also expected that over 250 jobs, associated with new businesses, will be created in addition to those jobs created during the construction stage of the project.

Roads: Salt and Grit levels

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the levels of salt and grit deposits currently available to Roads Service. (AQO 560/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, as of 5 January 2010, it was holding 10,331 tonnes of salt.

Roads Service has a contract with Salt Sales in Carrickfergus for the supply of salt, and is currently replenishing its stocks.

DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Benefit Appeal Tribunals

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the total amount paid to panel members of benefit appeal tribunals in 2009, broken down by constituency. (AQW 3607/10)

Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie): The information requested is not available on a calendar year or constituency basis. The table below provides the total amount payable to panel members of benefit appeal tribunals by financial year to November 2009, the latest date for which figures are available.

Total Cost 1 April 2008 – 31 March 2009	£2,147,822.25 (gross)
Total Cost 1 April 2009 – November 2009	£1,450,964.42 (gross)

Benefit Appeal Tribunals

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development how much each panel member is paid for each benefit appeal tribunal hearing. (AQW 3608/10)

Minister for Social Development: Panel members are paid on a half day sessional basis, with each session comprising a minimum of two and up to a maximum of four hearings, depending on complexity. The current fees payable to panel members are detailed below.

	Fee per session £
Legal Member (Chairman where more than one member on the panel)	206
Medical Member (GP)	151
Medical Consultant	185.50
Financial Member	151
Member with experience of disability	96

Cold Weather Payments

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Social Development if people who are in receipt of Incapacity Benefit or Disability Living Allowance qualify for cold weather payments. (AQW 3670/10)

Minister for Social Development: To qualify for Cold Weather Payment a person must be receiving State Pension Credit, Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance (Income-based) or Employment and Support Allowance (income-related) and, in addition, have one of the following:

- A relevant pensioner or disability premium;
- Child Tax Credit which includes a disability or severe disability element;
- A child under the age of 5 years;
- An applicable amount of Employment and Support Allowance which includes either the support component or the work-related activity component.

Those in receipt of Incapacity Benefit or Disability Benefit only would not qualify for a payment.

DSD Expenditure: North Antrim

Mr I Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on departmental expenditure in North Antrim during the current financial year. (AQO 562/10)

Minister for Social Development: In the financial year to date, projects have been approved totalling –

- £404,847 in respect of the Community Development Programme;
- £1,396,300 in respect of Urban Regeneration; and
- £15m in respect of Housing.

This amounts to a total of £16,801,147 for the North Antrim constituency. This does not include expenditure on Warm Homes as it is not possible to disaggregate such expenditure by parliamentary constituency, but I have no doubt North Antrim had its share. While I appreciate that the Member has a particular interest in his North Antrim constituency, it remains a fact that the vast bulk of my Department's resources are targeted at people in greatest need and that general criterion overrides political or administrative boundaries.

Social Housing: Costs

Mr M McLaughlin asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the £160,000 spent per social household in terms of value for money and to provide a breakdown of how the £160,000 is spent and how much is paid to each developer. (AQO 565/10)

Minister for Social Development: Mr Speaker, can I thank the Member for his question, albeit I am not entirely sure what the question is alluding to so I trust the Member will excuse me if I answer somewhat generically and I am sure he will use his supplementary to follow up if my answer does not cover that which he perhaps expected.

For the benefit of members, the question asks me for an assessment of the “£160,000 spent per social household” and then “How much is paid to each developer”.

I don't recognise the £160,000 figure – the average cost to DSD of a social house is £88,000. Obviously, this varies depending on the location and the house type.

My Department assesses the value for money aspect of each and every scheme through a benchmark calculation called Total Cost Indicators or TCI.

This formula is based on actual data taken at any given time from activity in the land and property market and produces a guide price for any development based on its specific location and the type of dwellings being delivered.

This applies irrespective of whether the housing is being built from new or acquired ‘off the shelf’. The Calculations are flexible enough to meet any type of unit in any location acquired through all procurement routes.

These figures are reviewed twice yearly to ensure that fluctuations in the housing market are taken into account as I am conscious that particularly in a decreasing market, we need to ensure we continue to pay only that which represents current market values. But I want to assure the Member and this House that whether a social house is newbuild or off-the-shelf we only purchase where it is the right house in the right place at the right price.

Voluntary and Community Groups: Funding

Mr D McNarry asked the Minister for Social Development what advice her Department is giving to voluntary and community groups regarding the level of Government funding for charities in the short and medium terms. (AQO 566/10)

Minister for Social Development: My Department greatly values the vital services provided by voluntary and community sector organisations across Northern Ireland. In terms of providing funding to the sector, I have tried to increase the focus on supporting services as opposed to funding posts. It is clear, however, that the current financial climate presents significant challenges to both government departments and to the sector in terms of future funding and delivery of these services.

I am committed to bidding for sufficient levels of funding to sustain these important services during the next Comprehensive Spending Review period. All Ministers will, however, be required to make difficult decisions and ensure that resources are used in the most effective way. There is also an onus on voluntary and community sector organisations to work together in providing more integrated and efficient services so that they make Government funding go as far as possible. Naturally my Department has advised the sector of the financial challenges that lie ahead.

Mixed Housing

Dr S Farry asked the Minister for Social Development what progress has been made on the development of mixed housing. (AQO 567/10)

Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. I provided the Member with an update in November on the development of mixed housing and detailed the twin track approach I have adopted to achieve the vision of a shared future, firstly through the Social Housing Development Programme and secondly through the Shared Neighbourhood Programme.

To date, this approach has delivered four shared development schemes located in Enniskillen, Lisburn, Banbridge and Sion Mills with more to follow this year. I remain firmly committed to exploring new and innovative ways of securing a shared future in housing whilst continuing to meet housing need.

As I reported in November, the Shared Neighbourhood Programme, launched in August 2008 as a three year pilot programme, is aimed at supporting and encouraging 30 shared neighbourhoods, in existing estates, across Northern Ireland. To date, 16 housing areas have agreed to participate in the Programme, with the remaining 14 areas to be announced in the coming months.

I have always maintained that shared future housing will be my priority where it is desirable, practicable and safe. It is not simply a matter of providing more homes but rather about changing hearts and minds. This takes time and requires meaningful, and sometimes protracted, consultation within and between communities. However, I can assure you that achieving a shared future remains high on my agenda and I am looking at ways to take it to the next level.

But, as I have stated previously, housing initiatives alone cannot tackle our problems of sectarianism and division. In my view, the successful achievement of a shared future, based on equality and mutual respect, goes beyond the realm of housing and is an action to be addressed by the entire Northern Ireland Executive.

I recently hosted 14 public meetings across the North where many people who attended demonstrated a real appetite for tackling this biggest barrier to achieving a society at peace with itself. Very shortly I will report, my findings to other Ministers on how this work should be progressed.

Social Housing: Portadown

Mr D Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development for an outline of progress on social housing provision in the Watson Street / Edenderry area of Portadown. (AQO 568/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Watson Street/Edenderry area of Portadown is located within the local housing area identified by the Housing Executive as 'Portadown 2.' The projected need, as identified by the Housing Executive, in this area over the next five years is for 30 homes. These will be delivered over two sites. The first is for 20 units at Mahon Park, and the second is for 10 units at Hanover Street/Queen Street.

Clanmil Housing Association is taking forward the Mahon Park scheme which involves the purchase of former MOD housing. South Ulster Housing Association is taking forward the second scheme which involves rehabilitation/infill proposals at a number of town centre locations.

Both schemes are in the current Social Housing Development Programme and if they cannot for whatever reason deliver this year, they will be automatically rolled forward into next year's Programme.

Social Housing: Funding

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister for Social Development for the up-to-date position on social housing funding. (AQO 570/10)

Minister for Social Development: The economic downturn with the near collapse of capital receipts left a huge hole in the housing budget and although the Executive has regularly allocated additional funds to housing it has not been enough to close the gap. When I launched the New Housing Agenda in February 2008, I made it clear that I would seek to bring forward greater levels of Private Finance to complement the resources already committed from the public purse. I am continuing to explore a number of innovative options to fund the Housing Agenda, some of which have been successfully implemented.

Grant to Housing Associations has been reduced by approximately 10%, in effect requiring Housing Associations to contribute even greater levels of Private Finance in the delivery of new social homes. This means that we will make our money go further.

The grant funding of £15 million that I have provided to the Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association has, for the first time, enabled it to attract its own significant private investment of £48 million to deliver affordable housing, and the Ulster Bank has agreed to work with the Co-ownership Housing Association in making mortgages without deposits available to applicants.

My officials are working closely with the Housing Executive to develop the social housing development programme to build, increasingly, on land already in public ownership, which will reduce the land-cost element of the Development Programme and allow us to build more homes with the same amount of money. The European Investment Bank has agreed to invest a record £30 million this year in five Housing Associations to deliver a range of new schemes right across Northern Ireland. This investment will complement the funding I have already made available and will support the delivery of 1750 new homes this year, our largest total for a decade.

I have been extremely innovative financially in the purchase of ex-military houses, particularly at Pond Park in Lisburn, where I have achieved tremendous value for the taxpayer.

Despite sound financial management and innovation the financial outlook for housing remains extremely difficult. The dependency on receipts will always undermine the housing capital programme and it is only when the two are decoupled that housing can be put on a firm financial footing.

Private Sector Housing Grants

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister for Social Development how many applicants for private sector housing grants in the West Tyrone constituency have been categorised under 'exceptional circumstances' as eligible for immediate funding. (AQO 571/10)

Minister for Social Development: To date the Housing Executive has considered 263 cases under exceptional circumstances for all the Grants Offices and of these it has been agreed that 186 cases can be considered for grant aid. For the West Tyrone constituency, covering the Strabane and Omagh District Council areas, the Housing Executive has considered 9 cases and I am pleased to say that all 9 can be considered for grant aid.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr K McCarthy asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the Warm Homes Scheme. (AQO 573/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Warm Homes Scheme is my Department's main programme in tackling fuel poverty. The Warm Homes Scheme was been hugely popular and very successful since its introduction in 2001. Over £118 million has been spent making in excess of 71,000 households warmer.

Following a competitive tendering process the new Warm Homes Scheme contract was awarded on 1 July and H&A Mechanical Services Ltd and Bryson Charitable Group are the new scheme managers. My officials have stringent monitoring arrangements in place with both the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, who are responsible for administering the scheme and the scheme managers. Monthly monitoring meetings are in place at which scheme managers provide detailed reports on progress to date against targets.

As with the award of any new contract, there is inevitably a settling in period. However, I am very pleased with the progress both scheme managers have made to date. At the end of December, 6885 successful applications have been received.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 22 January 2010

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Community Relations Council

Lord Morrow asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 2669/10, to detail the job title for each post funded by the Community Relations Council in (i) Armagh; (ii) Belfast; (iii) Derry; (iv) Fermanagh; and (v) Omagh. (AQW 3609/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): It has come to our attention that the information which we provided in our letter dated 7th December 2009 in answer to AQW 2669/10 was incomplete. Research to answer this current question (AQW 3609) has revealed that 3.5 posts had been omitted from the previous answer. The changes are in relation to posts in Nexus in Belfast and Wave in Omagh and have been included in the tables below as indicated. These corrections to the staffing figures do not alter the overall funding figures stated in AQW 2669/10.

The job titles for each post funded by the Community Relations Council in (i) Armagh; (ii) Belfast; (iii) Derry; (iv) Fermanagh; and (v) Omagh are as follows:

ARMAGH

Organisation	Workers	Total
REACT	CR Officer Administrator	2
FAIR	Director Administrator	2
SAVER/NAVER	Director Administrator	2
WAVE	Development Worker Administrator	2
Homes Unites Against Ruthless Terror	Co-ordinator Administrator	2
Total		10

BELFAST

Organisation	Workers	Total
Belfast Interface Project	Director Senior Support Worker Development Worker	3
174 Trust	Director	1
Ballynaveigh CDA	Assistant Director	1

Organisation	Workers	Total
Interaction	CEO Administrator	2
Intercomm	Development Officer	1
Linc Resource Centre	Director Co-ordinator Administrator	3
North Belfast Interface Network	Co-ordinator Project Worker Administrator	3
SLIG	Interface Worker x 2 Youth Worker	3
Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland	Director Administrator	2
Ashton Centre	Project Worker	1
Ballymurphy Women's Centre	Development Worker	1
Contact Youth	Clinical Supervisor	1
Corpus Christi Services	Counsellor Administrator	2
Families Beyond Conflict	Development Officer	1
HAVEN	Project Worker	1
Institute for Counselling and Personal Development	Administrator	1
Lenadoon Counselling	Counsellor Administrator	2
New Life Counselling	Administrative Officer	1
NEXUS	Counsellors	2
NI Music Therapy Trust	Music Therapist	1
Relatives For Justice	Director Project Worker Administrator	3
Shankill Stress	Director Counsellor Project Worker	3
Springhill Community House	Development Officer Administrator	2
Streetbeat Youth	Counsellor	1
Survivors of Trauma	Co-ordinator Administrator	2
Wider Circle	Development Worker	1
Victims and Survivors Trust	Development Worker Administrator	2
WAVE	Project Worker x 2 Director	3
Total		50¹

¹ This figure is 2.5 posts higher than declared in AQW 2669/10 and represents a correction to that response.

DERRY

Organisation	Workers	Total
Junction / Holywell Trust	Director Co-ordinator Administrator x 2	4
Peace and Reconciliation Group	Director Finance Officer Training Officer Project Officer	4
Community Action for Locally Managing Stress	Co-ordinator Administrator	2
Columba House	Co-ordinator Administrator	2
Cunamh	Co-ordinator Administrator	2
Derry Well Women	Project Co-ordinator	1
Lifeways Psychotherapy	Director / Counsellor	1
United Services Club	Co-ordinator	1
WAVE	Counsellor / Art Therapist Area co-ordinator Development Worker	3
Total		20

FERMANAGH

Organisation	Workers	Total
Fermanagh Trust	Development Worker Administrator	2
Aisling Centre	Co-ordinator	1
Firinne	Co-ordinator Administrator	2
South East Fermanagh Foundation	Co-ordinator Administrator	2
Ely Centre	Director Administrator	2
Total		9

OMAGH

Organisation	Worker	Total
Omagh Support and Self Help	Co-ordinator Administrator	2
Tara Centre	Counsellor Administrator	2
West Tyrone Voice	Director Administrator	2
WAVE	Development Worker x2 Administrator	3
Total		9²

² This figure is 1 post higher than declared in AQW 2669/10 and represents a correction to that response.

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland

Mr D McKay asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on each Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI) project that affects North Antrim (AQW 3675/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Information on current projects taking place within North Antrim is included in the table below.

Project name	A26/M2 Ballee Road East; Ballymena	Rail - Infrastructure (Bridge Replacement, Antrim to Coleraine)
Department	DRD	DRD
Sub Pillar	Roads	Public Transport
Contract Description and latest procurement news	A26/M2 Ballee Road East; Ballymena	Bridge replacement along track from Antrim to Coleraine
Contract Value (£000s)	Between £3m and £6m	Between £1m and £3m
Contract Type	Construction	Construction
Published To Web	Yes	Yes
Invitation To Tender: Date	12/2008	11/2008
Contract Award: Date	4/2009	1/2009
Completion: Date	q/e Mar 2010	q/e Dec 2009

North Antrim will also gain from the improvements to infrastructure that are designed to deliver benefits to the whole region (or a wider area than North Antrim). For example, improvements in connectivity through road and transport upgrades or improved technologies (project Kelvin), improvements to acute hospitals, the social housing programme, waste management programme, and also capital grants made available through DETI, DCAL or DARD. Updates on these projects are available through the ISNI Web Portal www.isni.gov.uk.

Childcare

Mrs M O'Neill asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what measures are being put in place to ensure affordable, flexible and age appropriate childcare is available to enable parents to access employment. (AQW 3815/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People identified childcare as a priority and tasked members of its cross-departmental sub-group on Child Poverty to undertake an exercise to consider the issues. A preliminary report was completed in June and the Sub-Committee agreed that an economic appraisal be carried out on a range of strategic options.

A consultant has been appointed to do this and it is hoped the work will be completed by early March. Ministers will make decisions on the way forward following consideration of this report.

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland

Mrs N Long asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the creation of a fixed-term development plan to underpin the Investment Strategy, including firm project commitments and key project milestones and timelines that would invigorate the delivery of the Strategy, facilitate accountability and create confidence with private sector partners. (AQW 3860/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Capital spending of nearly £1.7 billion in 2008-09 marks the highest level of expenditure ever on infrastructure, and we anticipate a comparable high level of spend in 2009-10. Since the beginning of the current Investment Strategy, departments have been fully utilising the resources for new capital investment. The majority of the major schemes listed in the ISNI document itself are underway or will be commenced in the near term.

This outcome has been assisted by the production of individual Investment Delivery Plans by departments (IDPs) detailing the projects for which they are responsible. These plans provide information to facilitate effective delivery monitoring and capacity building in the public sector. The IDPs are available through the websites of individual departments and the Strategic Investment Board (www.sibni.org).

In addition, the Investment Strategy Delivery Tracking System (DTS) was rolled out to all departments and related public bodies in 2009. Over 500 projects are currently logged on the DTS. Information taken for the DTS is publicly available through the Investment Strategy Web Portal. (www.isni.gov.uk).

The availability of the Web Portal is assisting the construction industry with its business planning by allowing contractors to remain fully informed on opportunities arising from current and future infrastructure projects as they progress into procurement and delivery.

Review of 2010-11 Spending Plans for Departments

Mr S Hamilton asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) which Ministers were in attendance at the Executive meeting which approved the Review of 2010 - 11 Spending Plans for Departments; (ii) if a vote was taken when agreeing the proposals; (iii) if the Review was agreed unanimously or with dissent; and (iv) to indicate which Ministers, if any, registered dissent formally. (AQW 3883/10)

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.

Victims and Survivors Service

Mr P Doherty asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the key issues raised in the recent consultation on the victims and survivors service. (AQO 579/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: We have received 29 responses to the recent consultation on a Victims and Survivors Service. We are currently considering the detail of those responses. We have also forwarded a summary of the responses to the OFMDFM Committee.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank those groups and individuals who took time to contribute on this important issue.

A number of key themes have emerged in the responses, including, the proposed design of the Service, funding, the Comprehensive Needs Assessment and the timescale for establishment of the Service. We will be considering all of the issues raised carefully as we decide how to move on to the next stage in the development of the new service.

Strategic Investment Board

Mr F McCann asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the review of the Strategic Investment Board will be completed. (AQO 580/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: A routine review of the Strategic Investment Board has been underway since the autumn and has involved consultation with a wide range of stakeholders across the public, private and third sectors. The review is now nearing completion and we expect to receive its recommendations for consideration shortly. We will share the findings of the Review with the OFMDFM Committee once they are available.

Disability Discrimination Act: Compliance

Mr S Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, following the publication on 3 December of the 'Promoting Social Inclusion Report on Disability', if they have identified any major public service that is not compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act. (AQO 582/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister would expect all public authorities to comply fully with the provision of the Disability Discrimination Act. There is no duty however placed on this Department to monitor compliance.

It is the responsibility of The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland to keep under review the “disability duties” placed on public authorities. This duty came into effect on 1 January 2007 as part of a series of changes to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (as amended by Article 5 of the Disability Discrimination (NI) Order 2006).

The Commission published in December 2009, its first review report which provides an evaluation of progress to date by public authorities and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland in implementing the disability duties. A copy of this report is available in the Assembly Library and on the Commission’s website.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy

Mrs N Long asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the production of a single draft document for public consultation on the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration strategy. (AQO 583/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The draft Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration was originally meant to have been brought forward before the end of 2008. That and subsequent commitments on timing were made in good faith, and it was our expectation that those would be met. Reaching agreement on the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration strategy (CSI) remains one of the top policy priorities of OFMDFM.

Our commitment within the Programme for Government under PSA 7 “Making Peoples Lives Better” – Objective 5 – ‘to implement a programme of cohesion and integration for a shared and better future for all’ will be honoured. This issue is too important to get wrong and we will work at it until we have honoured that pledge.

Our officials continue to work intensively towards an agreed strategy and we believe that progress is being made that will benefit all our people now and over the longer term; work to promote community relations and good race relations has continued over the past two years, led and supported by us and the whole Ministerial team.

OFMDFM: Budget 2010-11

Mr A McQuillan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps they are taking to deal with budgetary pressures for 2010-2011. (AQO 584/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Finance Minister announced the outcome of the Executive’s review of its 2010-11 spending plans to the Assembly on 12 January 2010. The Review recommends that OFMDFM’s opening budget for 2010/11 is reduced by £4.1m (5%) on Current Expenditure and £5.2m (30%) on Capital Expenditure.

We will publish details of how we will deliver these budget reductions on the OFMDFM website shortly as part of the Executive’s consultation on its 2010/11 Spending Plans.

OFMDFM: Staffing

Mr W Irwin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans they have to reduce the number of civil servants in their Department. (AQO 585/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Structures and staffing levels in the Department are regularly reviewed to ensure the work of the Department is delivered in the most efficient and effective way. The size of the Department has reduced from 408 staff in post in September 2007 to 394 in December 2009.

While we have made significant progress in reducing costs in the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister during the last two years, we are committed to finding further efficiencies. This will include reducing the Departmental staffing complement by approximately 51 full time equivalents. Work is underway to effect these changes as swiftly as possible through redeployment within the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Victims Groups

Lord Morrow asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the distribution of funding for victims groups. (AQO 587/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: During the 2009/10 financial year we have allocated almost £5 million to support groups working with victims and survivors. Groups have availed of Core funding and Small Grants through schemes administered on our behalf by the Community Relations Council.

We are currently considering options for support for groups as part of transitional arrangements in preparation for the establishment of the new Victims and Survivors Service. It is our intention that groups will not be disadvantaged as we implement the new strategy.

Cold Weather

Mr P J Bradley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action the Executive has taken, or intends to take, to respond to the needs of the community due to the recent freezing weather. (AQO 588/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: In addition to issuing Winter Fuel Payments which are paid to those aged 60 or over at a rate of £250, and to those aged 80 or over at a rate of £400, the Department for Social Development has, to date, made arrangements to issue three separate Cold Weather Payments of £25 each to all qualifying customers regardless of age. In total, approximately 166,000 customers will benefit from the Cold Weather Payment Scheme.

As well as providing heating and insulation measures, the Warm Homes Scheme also provides advice on maximising household income by ensuring that vulnerable people are claiming all the benefits to which they are entitled. For the first time, Working Tax Credit is a qualifying benefit for both heating and insulation measures and the over 60 age restriction for heating measures has been removed. Over £118 million has been spent making in excess of 71,000 households warmer.

The Department for Regional Development has advised that Roads Service spread salt at the most effective times, to help traffic on the busier main through routes move safely and freely in the wintry conditions. Some salting of secondary routes was also undertaken, where appropriate.

Roads Service also committed significant resources to maintain approximately 3,500 salt bins provided on public roads.

Northern Ireland Water's (NIW) Winter Contingency Plan is reviewed annually, in advance of the winter period, and a series of pre-emptive actions are implemented to mitigate any potential adverse weather situations that may occur.

On Thursday 24 December 2009, NIW became aware of a higher than usual demand on water supplies, and water treatment works were operated at full capacity to compensate for the increased demand. On Monday 28 December, NIW activated a category-1 incident management regime from its Head Office in Belfast, supported by three tactical management teams in Altnagelvin (Derry/Londonderry), Westland House (Belfast) and Omagh.

Over the nine-day Christmas period, around 14,000 calls were received by NIW, of which 2,500 related to interruptions to the water supply caused by 54 burst watermains, 191 burst service pipes and 195 leaks within private property. In the period up to 30 December, NIW had tankered 13 million litres of water to maintain supplies from depleted service reservoirs, and provided 140,000 litres of bottled water to affected customers. NIW staff worked continuously over the Christmas and New Year period to locate and repair bursts, fill critically low reservoirs, provide alternative supplies and to provide advice and information to customers. At its peak, over 200 NIW staff and contractors were deployed in response to the situation.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) maintained close contact with the energy, telecommunications and food retail sectors during the cold spell. All have robust contingency plans in place for such an event. Supply chains coped well, particularly gas supplies to meet the very high level of demand, with little or no impact on Northern Ireland customers.

Throughout the freezing weather conditions, the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (CCNI) monitored the situation and provided advice to the public on practical issues such as the protection of pipes from freezing and what to do if there is a burst, as well as advice on transportation and obtaining heating oil at the best price.

In summary, our Executive colleagues have ensured that the Departments and their agencies responded quickly and effectively to the needs of the community during what proved to be a challenging time for many.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Grants for Farmers

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to offer grants to (i) livestock farmers to assist with additional feeding costs; and (ii) arable farmers who have lost produce, due to the severe weather. (AQW 3631/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew): The recent severe weather has caused problems and created inconvenience for farmers and my thoughts are with all those individuals and businesses who have suffered disruption.

There are currently no financial support measures available for farmers' losses or additional feeding costs due to the severe weather, and my Department is currently facing significant financial resource pressures, across the board. I have considered all avenues for financial support from Europe, including State Aid and the European Union Solidarity Fund (EUSF), however, these are not feasible in the circumstances.

As you will be aware I raised the issue of the recent flooding with my Executive Colleagues, and the Executive has set up a task force on the matter. Its work is ongoing and there may be lessons to be learnt in relation to handling of severe weather conditions generally from this important exercise.

DARD/ CAFRE Development Advisors will continue to be available to provide technical support in dealing with problems brought on by the severe weather conditions such as feed shortage or possible crop damage.

Graphic Information Systems (GIS)

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she would consider introducing a tolerance level for geographic information systems (GIS) mapping so that hedges can be fully considered and reduced to conform to GIS mapping figures. (AQW 3719/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The handling of features such as hedges is clearly set out in guidance provided by the European Commission.

In accordance with this guidance, where hedges form a boundary between fields and are traditionally part of good agricultural practice in the region, they can be considered as part of the area of the field if they are 4 metres wide or less with up to 2 m can be attributed to the area of each field. Where the hedge is part of an internal feature in a field, it can be accepted as part of the field if the width is less than 2 metres.

However, if a hedge forming a boundary is more than 4 metres wide, then the whole hedge has to be removed from the eligible area of the fields. Similarly, if the hedge is an internal feature in the field and is more than 2 metres wide, then the whole hedge has to be removed from the area of the field.

Bluetongue

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to prevent the spread of Bluetongue disease. (AQW 3720/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department has a range of preventive measures in place to deal with the threat of Bluetongue. I have continually advised farmers against imports of susceptible animals from the Bluetongue affected areas. Any farmer who applies for an import licence is advised of the risk to their own herd and the national herd if they import animals from Bluetongue affected areas. They are also advised that they may not be compensated if DARD has cause to slaughter an imported animal because it is diseased. For animals imported from Bluetongue zones, pre-import testing is one of the conditions laid down by

EU regulations. In addition, any susceptible animals that are imported must be kept in isolation until they have been post import tested and the Department is content that they do not pose a threat.

My officials have worked closely with our key industry stakeholders on preparedness to deal with the threat of this disease, through the Bluetongue Working Group and will continue to do so. We have provided advice to the industry regarding the clinical signs of this disease and information is also available on the DARD website.

My Department also continues to work closely with counterparts in Dublin to ensure all appropriate measures are taken to retain the island's Bluetongue free status.

Our current veterinary risk assessment is that the preventative measures we already have in place continue to be appropriate to the risk from the disease being introduced through live animal imports

Snared Animals

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many animals were snared (i) legally; and (ii) illegally in each of the last five years, broken down by animal type. (AQW 3723/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department does not hold or collect the information being sought. My officials have contacted the Department of the Environment (DOE), which regulates the use of snares, and they have been advised that the DOE does not hold this information either.

Single Farm Payment

Mr W Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) as of 31 December 2009, how many farmers who had not received a farm inspection have yet to receive their Single Farm Payment; (ii) how many farmers in total, including those who had inspections, have not yet received their Single Farm Payment; and (iii) on what date did the final on-farm inspection take place. (AQW 3879/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

- (i) As at 31 December 2009, 4,626 farmers out of 36,761 farmers, who had not received an eligibility inspection for the 2009 scheme year, had not received a 2009 Single Farm Payment.
- (ii) As at 18 January 2010, the payment position had not been finalised for 3,743 (9.6%) of all of the claims submitted under the 2009 Single Farm Payment Scheme
- (iii) The last on-farm eligibility inspection was carried out on 26 November 2009.

Brucellosis Incident in Co. Armagh

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what actions her Department is taking to identify the source of the brucellosis incident in Co. Armagh; and what progress has been made to date. (AQW 3958/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The initial investigation into this incident is ongoing, and as the Department is co-operating with the PSNI no further comment can be made at this time.

Farm Modernisation Programme

Mr D Kennedy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if a decision has been taken on qualification criteria for the second phase of the Farm Modernisation Scheme. (AQO 593/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: A paper detailing the proposed additional selection criteria for the second Tranche of the Farm Modernisation Programme is currently being prepared for consideration at the next meeting of the Rural Development Programme Monitoring Committee, which is due to take place on 3 February 2010. I would not want to be specific about the additional criteria until the Committee membership, which includes industry representatives, have had an opportunity to read the proposals.

I will arrange for a copy of the proposed selection criteria paper to be forwarded to the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee at the same time as it is issued the Monitoring Committee.

Livestock Identification

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update on the implementation of electronic identification in livestock markets. (AQO 596/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Sheep and Goats legislation came into operation on 31 December 2009. The new system requires keepers to apply electronic, or EID, tags to sheep and to record their individual tag numbers when they move. This is compulsory under EU legislation to ensure effective traceability, especially in the event of a disease outbreak such as Foot and Mouth Disease.

I have long sought to reduce the impact of this EU legislation on our local sheep industry. In August 2009, we secured an important concession from the European Commission, which now allows markets and meat plants to act as Central Points of Recording to read and record tag numbers on behalf of flock keepers. This will significantly reduce the burden and costs on flock keepers here.

My officials have been working closely with representatives of our local livestock markets and meat plants, and others, to ensure we have a Central Point of Recording system in place from the spring of this year, as this function will be a fundamental element of our sheep electronic identification system.

My officials have recently sent letters to all livestock markets and meat plants asking them to advise if they are interested in becoming approved as a Central Point of Recording. To date a number of markets and meat plants have registered an interest.

I am delighted to announce today that I have been able to secure funding of £250,000 to provide some financial assistance to markets, meat plants, export assembly centres and collection centres to help them undertake the Central Point of Recording role.

Red Meat Industry Task Force

Mr A Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the cost to her Department of developing and implementing the Northern Ireland Red Meat Industry Task Force strategy over the last three years. (AQO 597/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Red Meat Task Force Strategy was published in October 2007. The cost of developing the strategy was of £750k, which was split evenly between my Department (DARD), Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) and industry organisations.

The report identified actions for each of the main players and DARD is actively playing its part in implementing those that apply to its own role. Over the past 3 years the cost to DARD, has been approximately £90k.

Single Farm Payments

Mr S Moutray asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update on the processing and delivery of Single Farm Payments. (AQO 598/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: By today, my Department has paid out £255.467 million to 34,944 farmers. This is 90.4% of farmers who claimed Single Farm Payment in 2009. Less than 10% of claims have not yet been finalized for a variety of reasons, including queries on the claims, the need to complete processing of on-farm inspection reports, challenges by others of the right to claim the land, the need to await probate or because the farmer has not provided bank account details to allow payments to be made by electronic transfer. Not all the remaining claims will be due a payment either because of ineligibility or the application of penalties under scheme rules.

I am pleased that this year, my Department has again improved its payment performance.

Flooding: Fermanagh

Ms M Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update on the progress of the Fermanagh Flooding Taskforce and to outline what efforts can be made to reduce the impact of flooding in the future. (AQO 599/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The cross-departmental Task Force was set up by the Executive in response to the widespread flooding in County Fermanagh in November 2009 and the group held its first meeting in Enniskillen on 22 December 2009. The meeting was attended by me in my role as Agriculture and Rural Development Minister, the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister Arlene Foster MLA, Regional Development Minister Conor Murphy MP MLA, Department of the Environment Minister Edwin Poots MLA and Head of the Civil Service Bruce Robinson. Representatives from a range of other government organisations, including local agencies, also took part.

All present found the meeting very useful in providing an opportunity to hear first hand from local officials about the challenges they faced in dealing with the flooding and, once again, I wish to pay tribute to the people of Fermanagh for the way they responded as a community to help each other at a very difficult time and contributed to making the impact less than it might otherwise have been. Members of the Task Force expressed a desire to hear from those most affected by the floods and, as such, announced that evidence gathering meetings were to be held in Fermanagh. The first such meeting took place on 6 January 2010, and a further two meetings were held on 11 January 2010. The Task Force have agreed to a target date of the end of February 2010 for producing the first phase of its review, and I will be in a better position to provide an update on the work of the Taskforce and potential future measures to minimise the impact of future flooding at that time.

Bluetongue

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she intends to take following the receipt of information of an increase in imported animals from continental Europe and the resulting threat of Bluetongue disease. (AQO 601/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Bluetongue continues to be a serious threat to our agriculture industry. Our current veterinary risk assessment is that the import of potentially infected animals is the greatest risk. I have repeatedly advised farmers not to import susceptible animals from Bluetongue affected areas and I receive information on any such imports on a weekly basis.

I am very concerned about the increase in the number of animals imported from continental Europe during December 2009 and on 6 January I issued a statement reminding farmers of the risk to their own individual herds and the national herd. I also took part in an interview with an agriculture journalist on the subject.

I will continue to maintain the preventative measures that we have currently in place in the north, in addition to these imposed by EU Regulations. These include:-

- the provision of advice to anyone who applies for an import licence;
- the restriction of animals post import until my Department's Veterinary Officers are satisfied that they do not pose a threat; and
- a post import test for Bluetongue.

I urge anyone thinking of importing animals from Bluetongue affected areas to heed my appeal and the appeals from farming unions. Do not put your own farm business – and your own industry - in jeopardy by importing livestock from Bluetongue affected areas.

GM-free Zone

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, following the revised Programme for Government in the Republic of Ireland, if she has had any discussions with the Irish Government about creating an all-island genetically modified free zone. (AQO 602/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department's role, in relation to genetic modification is in the enforcement of European law controlling the import of animal feed stuffs and seed certification.

I am both personally and politically opposed to the growing of GM crops on the island of Ireland and am willing to discuss creating an all-island genetically modified free zone with the Government in the South.

Roles and responsibilities for the full range of issues raised by the genetic modification of food and animal feed is distributed across several local departments and agencies, including the Department of the Environment and the Food Standards Agency.

Rural Proofing

Mr D McClarty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has plans to make legislative provision for any Rural Proofing policy established by her Department. (AQO 603/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: A decision on the need for a legislative basis to underpin rural proofing will be made after the enhanced rural proofing process has been introduced across government. My officials are currently finalising a new rural proofing training programme and support materials that will be rolled out to policy makers in all government Departments during 2010-2011. A review of the impact of the training programme and support on the rural aspects of policy making will be carried out in 2011. The outcomes of this review will inform the need, if any, to legislate for rural proofing.

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Libraries: Dunmurry

Rt Hon J Donaldson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has for the future of library services in Dunmurry. (AQO 609/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr N McCausland): Library services in Dunmurry are being considered within Libraries NI's ongoing strategic Review of the Greater Belfast libraries estate.

A full public consultation on the Review proposals commenced on 11 January. As part of this process a series of meetings will be arranged at which Libraries NI will discuss the proposals with library users, staff, and the CAL Committee.

Nothing has been finalised by the Libraries NI Board at this stage and I would encourage everyone with an interest in libraries in Greater Belfast to participate in the consultation process. This will help ensure that in the future Belfast has a modern, accessible and excellent library service.

Ballymena United Football Club

Mr I Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the level of support his Department has made available to Ballymena Football Club and the Showgrounds in the last year. (AQO 610/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. In July 2008, Ballymena United Football Club received a provisional letter of offer for £205,000 under the Soccer Strategy Playing Facilities Programme towards improvement works at the Showgrounds stadium. It is anticipated that work will start on site shortly with all works due to be completed in this financial year. Furthermore, in December 2009, SNI issued a provisional letter of offer to the club for £800,000, under its Stadia Safety Programme, towards essential safety works. I understand the club is currently working through their conditions of award. Looking back over the last ten years, Ballymena United FC has received almost £1.76m in Government support. This is a good example of a club fully embedded in the community which is contributing positively to both senior and grassroots football.

Creative Industries

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has sought additional financing from public and private sources outside the Innovation Fund to boost the creative enterprises sector which employs over 34,000 people. (AQO 611/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The £5Million Creative Industries Innovation Fund was itself additional financing for the sector, having been sought and dedicated as such by my Department from government monies designated under the Northern Ireland Innovation Fund.

In addition to the Creative Industries Innovation Fund, my Department provided £1.98M funding to Northern Ireland Screen in 2008/09 by way of operating and education costs to support the development of a dynamic and sustainable screen industry. This investment was supported by an additional £11M from Invest Northern Ireland over 2007-10 to support film, television and digital content production.

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland also provides considerable support to individual artists and creative businesses. This fuels the emergence of creative people, services and enterprises. In 2008/09 my Department provided revenue and capital funding to the Arts Council totalling £19.44M.

In recent weeks I have met with a delegation from the Institute of Directors, and I am shortly due to meet with the Chief Executives' Forum, to discuss their ideas on ways to stimulate the creative industries sector and enhance private and public sector partnerships.

Such collaborations will serve to increase the range of support and investment opportunities available to creative enterprises and demonstrates the value of public and private sector leaders working together to support achievement of economic goals.

My Department also supports the work of Arts and Business NI, which encourages the establishment of innovative and mutually beneficial partnerships between business and arts organisations.

Members will be aware that we are facing a much more challenging fiscal environment which will put increasing pressure on all areas of expenditure. However, the creative industries can help to lead economic recovery and develop a vibrant and innovative economy in Northern Ireland and I will therefore continue to explore initiatives and investment opportunities that will support the sector.

Football: Amateur Clubs

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has made any approach to the Serious Organised Crime Agency regarding the allocation of funds from the profits of crime to local amateur football clubs, as is the case in Scotland. (AQO 612/10)

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 have not, therefore, directly contacted the Serious Organised Crime Agency regarding the allocation of funds from the proceeds of crime to local amateur football clubs, or indeed any other area within the remit of my Department.

However, I have given my full support to the distribution of funding provided through the Northern Ireland Office's Community Fund, which seeks to direct some of the funds recovered from criminal assets back to communities most affected by crime. As a result my Department will distribute, through its Arms Length Bodies, a proportion of the total funds available from the Community Fund. Approximately £30,000 of this will be distributed to sports projects by Sport NI through its Awards for Sport Programme.

The Awards for Sport Programme, which closed for applications on 6 January 2010, was open to applications from governing bodies, sports clubs, including amateur football clubs, and community and voluntary organisations.

Irish Language Strategy

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure which groups his Department actively consulted in 2008 and 2009 in relation to the development of a strategy for the promotion of the Irish language. (AQO 613/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In 2008 and 2009 my Department met with Foras na Gaeilge, Pobal, the Ulster-Scots Agency, the Ulster-Scots Academy Implementation Group and the Ulster-Scots Language Society in relation to the Indigenous or Regional Minority Languages Strategy.

During that period DCAL also engaged with Gerry Adams and other representatives from Sinn Féin, representatives from the SDLP and the Irish Guild of the Church of Ireland for discussions on the Language Strategy

Public consultation on the Strategy will form part of the policy development process.

Ulster Aviation Society

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how his Department plans to increase public access to the Ulster Aviation Society's collection at the Maze/Long Kesh site. (AQO 614/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department has no direct responsibility for public access either to the Ulster Aviation Society's collection or to the Maze/Long Kesh site.

The private collection of the Ulster Aviation Society can be viewed by the public through prior arrangement with the Society.

Details of these arrangements can be found on the Society's website.

The Schooner 'Result'

Mr S Neeson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans the National Museums have for the restoration of the schooner 'Result'. (AQO 615/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: National Museums Northern Ireland recognises the position of "The Result" as one of the UK's core collection of historic ships. It is also committed to developing and preserving maritime collections and making them accessible to the widest range of audiences. We will continue dialogue on options for the future of National Museums' maritime heritage collection.

"The Result" is currently protected under a purpose – built weatherproof awning.

Places for Sport Programme

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what alternative funding will be made available to the twelve GAA Clubs that met the criteria under the Places for Sport Programme but were subsequently denied funding. (AQO 616/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of exchequer and lottery funding. To date, SNI has run two phases of the Places for Sport programme, both of which were oversubscribed. For this reason and on the basis of SNI's scoring procedure, 32 applications, including 12 from GAA clubs, met the eligibility criteria but failed to secure exchequer funding. Should SNI be in a position to launch a new phase of the programme, all of these applicants will have the opportunity to re-apply and to be considered along with any other applications received against the eligibility criteria. However, this would be subject to budget availability. There are no other programmes funded by SNI that are designed to meet criteria similar to Places for Sport programme.

Midnight Soccer: South Belfast

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how his Department is supporting midnight soccer provision in the South Belfast constituency. (AQO 617/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. Midnight Street Soccer currently takes place at Olympia Leisure Centre in South Belfast, where it is supported by a number of organisations that have been in

receipt of SNI funding including the North Belfast Play Forum, Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group and the Greater Village Regeneration Trust.

Irish Language Strategy

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to explain the delay in bringing forward a strategy to the Executive for enhancing and promoting the Irish language. (AQO 618/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My officials provided an update on this issue to the CAL Committee on 10 December 2009.

Since taking up office I have been actively considering the issues surrounding the enhancement and development of the Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture and the enhancement and protection of the development of the Irish language.

I have also been taking account of the position of other regional or minority languages across the United Kingdom, especially the situation in Scotland which has close parallels to Northern Ireland in terms of regional and minority languages, albeit with some differences.

Two of the key issues that have arisen during my considerations are education and broadcasting. I have written to the Minister for Education seeking a meeting to discuss the cultural rights of children in the classroom. I am awaiting a response from the Minister in relation to a suitable date for the meeting.

I have also raised the issue of broadcasting with Paul Goggins as this is a reserved matter, and I await further progress on this matter.

Sports Stadia

Mr B Armstrong asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 3050/10, whether his Department has given any guidance to sporting bodies on the budget they should work within when seeking funding for the development of separate stadia for (i) football; (ii) rugby; and (iii) gaelic games. (AQW 4097/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department has informed the Governing Bodies that the Outline Business Case to examine the various stadium options is predicated on an indicative £110m being made available by Government, as its contribution toward the overall capital costs, subject to normal budgetary processes. No indicative budgets have been provided for the individual sports.

The allocation of funding to the individual Governing Bodies cannot be determined until the outcome of the Outline Business Case has been reviewed by my Department and subsequently approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Executive.

I recognise that the needs of the three Governing Bodies are quite different and my aim is to ensure that their respective strategic needs are addressed within the Outline Business Case.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Promoting Music in Schools

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Education what measures her Department has in place to promote music in (i) primary schools; and (ii) secondary schools, and in particular to encourage children to play a musical instrument. (AQW 3750/10)

Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane): Is gné riachtanach d'oideachas cothromaithe é an Ceol, a sholáthraíonn foirm chumhachtach shainiúil de chumarsáid agus a fheabhsaíonn féinmheas agus muinín daltaí. Is cuid reachtúil den churaclam athbhreithnithe é ó Bhonnchéim go hEochairchéim 3, agus féadann daltaí staidéar a dhéanamh air mar rogha scrúdaithe ag Eochairchéim 4. Tá teacht ag scoileanna ar sholáthar breise Ceoil fosta do dhaltaí ar mhian leo uirlis ar leith a fhoghlaim.

Music forms an essential part of a balanced education, providing a powerful and distinctive form of communication and expression, as well as enhancing pupils' self-esteem and confidence. It is a statutory part of the revised curriculum from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3 and pupils may also choose to study it as an exam choice at Key Stage 4. Schools also have access to additional music provision for pupils wishing to learn a particular instrument. This is provided by the Schools' Music Service of each Education & Library Board. These Music Services operate across and beyond all school sectors in both formal and informal settings, placing them in a key position to influence the lives of young people throughout and beyond their formal educational experience. The ELBs fund their music service from within their overall CASS budgets.

Musical Instruments in Schools

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Education what funding her Department has made available for schools to employ individuals to teach children to play musical instruments, in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 3751/10)

Minister of Education: Ní dháileann mo Roinn cistiú do scoileanna chun daoine a fhostú le paistí

a theagasc le huirlis cheoil a sheinm nó chun uirlisí ceoil a cheannach go sonrach. Soláthraíonn gach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne cistiú do Sheirbhís Cheoil a scoileanna, atá mar phríomhfhoinsé i leith teagasc gairmiúil uirlise agus uirlisí ceoil do scoileanna.

My Department does not allocate funding to schools specifically for the employment of individuals to teach children/young people to play musical instruments or to buy musical instruments. Each Education and Library Board provides funding to its schools' Music Service, which is the main source for professional instrumental teaching and musical instruments for schools. In-school provision for musical tuition is at the discretion of each individual school and it is up to schools to fund this provision from their delegated budgets. My department does not hold information relating to the detail of this provision, this could only be accessed at individual school level.

Nursery Schools: Admissions Criteria

Mrs N Long asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 8743/09, which states that in relation to the over-arching legal criteria for admissions to nursery schools "responsibility for drawing up these criteria rests entirely with the Board of Governors of each school", to confirm whether the over-arching criteria are set by the Department and whether Boards of Governors only have control over the setting of sub-criteria. (AQW 3757/10)

Minister of Education: Cuireann an Roinn Oideachais ceanglas i bhfeidhm ar thosaíocht a thabhairt do pháistí ó chúlraí faoi mhíbhuntáiste sóisialta (a bhfaigheann a dtuismitheoirí Sochair Shlándála Sóisialaí áirithe) agus dóibh siúd a bhfuil breithlá i mí Iúil/ Lúnasa acu. Caithfear cloí leo agus chomh luath agus a shásaítear an ceanglas sin, tá critéar breise le haghaidh iontrála de dhualgas ar gach naíscoil aonair agus léireoidh sé príomhthosaíochta an Bhoird Ghobharnóirí le haghaidh iontrála ina scoil/ naíolann.

DE sets a requirement to give priority to children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (whose parents are in receipt of certain social security benefits) and those with July/August birthdays. This must be adhered to and once this requirement is satisfied, additional criteria for admission are the responsibility of each individual nursery school and will reflect the Board of Governors priorities for admissions to their school/playgroup.

Irish Medium Unit, St Joseph's Grammar School, Donaghmore

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister of Education if she will ensure that the Irish medium unit planned for St Joseph's Grammar school, Donaghmore, will be listed in this year's booklet which guides parents on transfer options. (AQW 3773/10)

Minister of Education: Foilsíodh an togra forbartha i dtaca leis an aonad Gaeilge ar 17 Nollaig agus críochnóidh an tréimhse comhairlithe reachtúil ar 17 Feabhra. Déanfaidh mé cinneadh ar an togra chomh luath agus is féidir i ndiaidh an dáta sin. Idir an dá linn, foilsíodh leabhráin na gcritéar iontrála cheana féin.

The development proposal in respect of the Irish medium unit was published on 17 December and the statutory two month consultation period ends on 17 February. I will make a decision on the proposal as soon as possible after that date. In the meantime the admissions criteria booklets have already been published.

Education and Skills Authority

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 3400/10 (i) who pays the salaries relating to the Education and Skills Authority outlined in AQW 2817/10; and (ii) the number of posts held within the Education and Skills Authority and the related salary bands. (AQW 3779/10)

Minister of Education: Níl aon fhoireann fostaithe ag an Údarás um Oideachas agus Scileann cionn is nach bhfuil an tÚdarás ar marthain go fóill. Maoineáir foireann ar bith a bhíonn ag obair le Foireann Chur i bhFeidhm an Údaráis um Oideachas agus Scileanna ar bhonn lánaimseartha nó ar bhonn pro rata, de réir na n-uaireanta a oibríonn siad, ag an Roinn Oideachais.

No staff are currently employed by the Education and Skills Authority since the Authority has not yet come into existence. However, staff who are working with the Education and Skills Authority Implementation Team are funded either full time or pro rata, according to their hours of work, by the Department of Education.

Education and Skills Authority: Accommodation Costs

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 2817/10, to provide (i) a breakdown of the £359,000 accommodation costs incurred up to 31 October 2009 in preparation for the Education and Skills Authority; and (ii) the location and type of accommodation. (AQW 3780/10)

Minister of Education:

- (i) Tá miondealú ar chostais chóiríochta a tabhaíodh go dtí 31 Deireadh Fómhair in ullmhúchán le haghaidh an Údaráis um Oideachas agus Scileanna, mar a nochtadh in AQW 2817/10 leagtha amach sa tábla thíos:
- (i) A breakdown of the £359,000 accommodation costs incurred up to 31 October 2009 in preparation for the Education and Skills Authority, as disclosed in AQW 2817/10, is set out in the table below:

Type of Cost Incurred	£'000
Rental Costs	248
Building Work	40
Utilities	51
Security	4
Other Miscellaneous Costs	16
Total	359

- (ii) The accommodation costs relate to rented office accommodation at Forestview, Purdy's Lane, Belfast and Omagh Library, Spillars Place, Omagh.

Education and Skills Authority

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education how staff carrying out the functions of the Education and Skills Authority were recruited; and where the staff are located. (AQW 3781/10)

Minister of Education: Níl aon fhoireann fostaithe faoi láthair chun feidhmeanna an Údaráis um Oideachas agus Scileanna a dhéanamh cionn is nach bhfuil an tÚdarás ar marthain go fóill. Sanntar foireann d'Fhoireann Chur i bhFeidhm an Údaráis um Oideachas agus Scileanna le tacaíocht a thabhairt don Phríomhfheidhmeannach (Ainmnithe) le himeachtaí coinbhéirseachta a fheabhsú roimh theacht an ESA agus le hullmhú don Údarás um Oideachas agus Scileanna agus é a bhunú.

No staff are currently employed to undertake the functions of the Education Skills Authority since the Authority has not yet come into existence. However staff are seconded to the Education and Skills Authority Implementation Team (ESAIT) to support the Chief Executive (Designate) to take forward convergence activities in advance of ESA and to prepare for and establish the Education and Skills Authority.

Staff employed in ESAIT are seconded from their existing organisations on a full time or part time basis. As ESAIT is part of the Department of Education, some staff were seconded from the Department in accordance

with agreed procedures. Other staff have been recruited on a secondment basis following a trawl of Education Sector bodies affected by the Review of Public Administration (RPA).

Some staff are currently located at offices in Forestview, Purdys Lane, Belfast. Other staff divide their time between the location of their originating organisation and Forestview.

Musical Instruments in Schools

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Education what funding her Department has made available for schools to buy musical instruments, in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 3786/10)

Minister of Education: Ní dháileann mo Roinn cistiú do scoileanna chun daoine a fhostú le paistí a theagasc le huirlis cheoil a sheinm nó chun uirlisí ceoil a cheannach go sonrach. Soláthraíonn gach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne cistiú do Sheirbhís Cheoil a scoileanna, atá mar phríomhfhoinsé i leith teagasc gairmiúil uirlise agus uirlisí ceoil do scoileanna.

My Department does not allocate funding to schools specifically for the employment of individuals to teach children/young people to play musical instruments or to buy musical instruments. Each Education and Library Board provides funding to its schools' Music Service, which is the main source for professional instrumental teaching and musical instruments for schools. In-school provision for musical tuition is at the discretion of each individual school and it is up to schools to fund this provision from their delegated budgets. My department does not hold information relating to the detail of this provision, this could only be accessed at individual school level.

Musical Instruments in Schools

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Education what funding each Education and Library Board has made available for schools to (i) employ individuals to teach musical instruments; and (ii) to buy musical instruments, in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 3787/10)

Minister of Education: Níl an t-eolas don tréimhse ama seo i ngach ceann de na ceisteanna thuas ar fáil go héasca agus bheadh costas díréireach i gceist le hé a fháil. D'iarr mé ar na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, áfach, an t-eolas seo a bhailiú i dtaca leis na trí bliana a chuaigh thart. Scríobhfaidh mé chugat in am trátha, mar sin, nuair atá an t-eolas ar fáil.

The information for this period of time for each of the above questions is not readily available and an exercise to collect it would result in disproportionate costs. However, I have asked the ELBs to gather information relating to the last three years. I will, therefore, write to you in due course when the information is available.

Musical Instruments in Schools

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Education how many (i) primary schools; and (ii) secondary schools in each sector have employed individuals to teach children a musical instrument, broken down by Education and Library Board, in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 3788/10)

Minister of Education: Níl an t-eolas don tréimhse ama seo i ngach ceann de na ceisteanna thuas ar fáil go héasca agus bheadh costas díréireach i gceist le hé a fháil. D'iarr mé ar na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, áfach, an t-eolas seo a bhailiú i dtaca leis na trí bliana a chuaigh thart. Scríobhfaidh mé chugat in am trátha, mar sin, nuair atá an t-eolas ar fáil.

The information for this period of time for each of the above questions is not readily available and an exercise to collect it would result in disproportionate costs. However, I have asked the ELBs to gather information relating to the last three years. I will, therefore, write to you in due course when the information is available.

Musical Instruments in Schools

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Education how many children in (i) primary schools; and (ii) secondary schools in each sector have been taught a musical instrument in school, broken down by Education and Library Board, in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 3789/10)

Minister of Education: Níl an t-eolas don tréimhse ama seo i ngach ceann de na ceisteanna thuas ar fáil go héasca agus bheadh costas díréireach i gceist le hé a fháil. D'iarr mé ar na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, áfach, an t-eolas seo a bhailiú i dtaca leis na trí bliana a chuaigh thart. Scríobhfaidh mé chugat in am trátha, mar sin, nuair atá an t-eolas ar fáil.

The information for this period of time for each of the above questions is not readily available and an exercise to collect it would result in disproportionate costs. However, I have asked the ELBs to gather information relating to the last three years. I will, therefore, write to you in due course when the information is available.

Christmas Tree at Ballyholland, Newry

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Education the level of contribution, if any, made by her Department towards the provision of a Christmas Tree at Ballyholland, Newry. (AQW 3796/10)

Minister of Education: Ní dhearna an Roinn Oideachais aon ranníocaíocht le crann Nollag a cheannach ar Scoil Bhaile Cholmáin, an tIúr.

The Department of Education did not make any contribution towards the provision of a Christmas tree at Ballyholland, Newry.

Boards of Governors: List of Applicants

Mrs N Long asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 8743/09 in which she stated that “The Board of Governors must compile a list of all applicants, in rank order, regardless of whether the school is their first, second or third preference”, if after the point where applications are ranked by the Boards of Governors, nursery schools only have sight of the applications of those who ranked them first choice and if these are ranked in order of criteria until either the list of applicants is exhausted or the unit becomes over-subscribed. (AQW 3803/10)

Minister of Education: Tá na socruithe le haghaidh iontrála chuig naíscoileanna leagtha amach i gCiorclán 2009/05 na Roinne ‘Rollú Oscailte ar Naíscoileanna: Socruithe le haghaidh Iontrálacha Mheán Fómhair 2010’. Ní mór do naíscoileanna gach iarratas le haghaidh iontrála a mheas agus glacadh le daltaí suas go dtí go mbaineann siad amach a n-uimhir rollaithe atá formheasta. I scoileanna atá ró-shuibscríofa, cuirfear foirmeacha iarratais ar fáil do dhara rogha na dtuismitheoirí i leith daltaí nár glacadh leo ar a bpríomhrogha tríd an Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne.

The arrangements for admission to nursery schools are set out in The Department’s Circular Number 2009/05 ‘Open Enrolment in Nursery Schools: Arrangements for September 2010 Admissions’. Nursery schools must consider all applications for admissions and admit pupils up to their approved enrolment number. In schools which are oversubscribed, application forms for pupils who have not been accepted for admission at their first preference are made available to the parents’ second preference school via the Education and Library Board. This process is repeated for third preference schools etc. until all pupils are placed. Therefore, schools will have sight of application forms for first preference applicants plus application forms for applicants who have named the school as a lower preference but who were unsuccessful in gaining admission to other schools of their choice.

It is important to note that while the admissions process is running schools must entirely reassess the rank order established at first preference stage, when second preferences are received, in order to take account of whether any of these second preference candidates meet a higher criterion than the first preference candidates already considered. If so, these pupils would be ranked higher in the rank order established by the school, regardless of the fact that they are second preference candidates.

This process must happen regardless of whether or not the school has places available within the enrolment number at that stage in the admissions process. The school must repeat this process with every subsequent set of applications through third, fourth, fifth preference stages. A school cannot consider itself to have reached a final and conclusive rank order until all applications, regardless of preference, have been received, the school’s criteria have been applied to those candidates and the admissions process has closed. This ensures that it is the ability of an applicant to meet the school’s admission criteria which establish their position in the schools rank order, rather than the preference they have given to the school.

Preschool Provision

Mrs N Long asked the Minister of Education for her Department's assessment of the key differences between pre-school provision in a statutory nursery setting and that provided in voluntary and private settings. (AQW 3809/10)

Minister of Education: Cé go bhfuil roinnt difríochtaí idir soláthróirí deonacha/ príobháideacha réamhscoile ó thaobh soláthair de, ba chóir a thabhairt faoi deara go roinneann gach soláthar an curaclam céanna, atá ullmhaithe ag an Chomhairle Churaclaim, Scrúduithe agus Mheasúnachta, agus go bhfuil siad go léir oscailte le haghaidh cigireachta ag an Chigireacht Oideachais agus Oiliúna.

While there are a number of differences in provision between statutory and voluntary/private pre-school providers it should be noted that all providers share a common curriculum, prepared by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, and all are open to inspection by the Education and Training Inspectorate.

Key differences between the different types of providers are:

- All voluntary/private providers must be registered and inspected by the relevant Health and Social Care Trust under the Children's (N I) Order 1995. This leads to differences in terms of staff:child ratios:
1:8 in voluntary/private settings; 1:13 in statutory settings, staffed by qualified teachers;
- In voluntary/private settings all staff must be qualified to at least NVQ level 2, or equivalent, while leaders must have NVQ level 3 or equivalent. In statutory settings staff should comprise a qualified teacher and qualified nursery assistant;
- Under legislation the statutory sector can admit children who have attained the age of 2 and those under the statutory school starting age. Voluntary/private providers are funded only for those children in their immediate pre-school year;
- The funding of voluntary/private sector places was introduced in 1998 under the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme. The offer is for a free part-time place, for 2.5 hours per day for 38 weeks per year. In the statutory sector provision can be full-time or part-time;
- Pupils in nursery schools and classes are funded under the Local Management of Schools arrangements. Funding is provided under a Common Funding Formula and the level of funding is determined mainly by pupil numbers at each school. Additional financial support is also available through a range of other funding factors. Voluntary and Private sector providers are funded by direct grant, payable by the relevant Education and Library Board in instalments each year, at a flat rate per child, and which is reviewed annually.;
- In terms of accommodation, statutory nursery schools and classes are required to meet the Department's standards in respect of accommodation for nursery and primary school provision, while Voluntary and Private sector providers are required to conform to the standards set out in the Children (N I) Order 1995 Regulations and Guidance on Family Support, Childminding and Day Care.

Applications for Preschool Places

Mrs N Long asked the Minister of Education what measures are in place to familiarise parents with the deadlines for applications for pre-school places. (AQW 3811/10)

Minister of Education: The Education and Library Board's Pre-School Education Advisory Groups (PEAGs) undertake publicity in respect of the admissions process for funded pre-school provision on a joint-Board basis. This involves both the use of newspaper advertising and the production of a joint 5 Board poster which is sent out to primary schools, nursery schools, libraries, Health Centres, Post Offices and DHSSPS offices.

Ina theannta sin, táirgeann an Roinn póstaer agus leabhrán eolais le haghaidh tuismitheoirí agus cuirtear cóipeanna díobh seo chuig soláthróirí deonacha agus príobháideacha a bhfuil áiteanna cistithe réamhscoile acu, naiscoileanna, bunscoileanna a bhfuil naí-aonaid acu agus suíomhanna Thús Cinnte. Dáileann Grúpaí Comhairleacha Oideachais Réamhscoile póstaer na Roinne agus cóipeanna den leabhrán le haghaidh tuismitheoirí fosta do leabharlanna, Ionaid Shláinte, Oifigí Phoist agus Oifigí na Roinne **Sláinte**, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta.

In addition, the Department also produces a poster and an information booklet for parents and copies of these are sent to voluntary and private providers with funded pre-school places, nursery schools, primary schools

with nursery units and Sure Start settings. Copies of the booklet for parents and Departmental poster are also distributed, through the PEAGs, to Libraries, Health Centres, Post Offices and DHSSPS offices.

This centrally co-ordinated publicity is in addition to that which individual settings undertake at local level.

Nursery Applications Process

Mrs N Long asked the Minister of Education if she has considered reviewing the nursery applications process to ensure that priority is given to children who are in their final pre-school year, regardless of the preference they have given, over under-age children who may have ranked the unit first on their list of preferences.

(AQW 3814/10)

Minister of Education: Agus iad ag breithniú iarratas le linn phróiseas iontrála na réamhscoilíochta, tugann gach soláthar reachtúil naiscoilíochta tosaíocht d'iarratais ó pháistí a bhfuil ina mbliain dheireanach réamscoile ag gach céim tosaíochta. Ciallaíonn sé seo go mbeidh tosaíocht ag an iarratas le haghaidh páiste a bhfuil ina réamhscoil dheireanach ar iarratas le haghaidh páiste atá níos óige.

In considering applications during the pre-school admissions process, all statutory nursery providers give priority to applications in respect of children in their final pre-school year at each preference stage. This means that a stated preference for a child in their final pre-school will have priority over an application from a younger child. Nursery schools and units only consider applications from younger children once the admissions procedure has been applied to the applications for the children in their final pre-school year. Funded pre-school places in the voluntary and private sector are only open to children in their final pre-school year.

Cost of Sending Literature in Irish to Protestant Schools

Mr D Hilditch asked the Minister of Education the cost of sending literature in Irish to Protestant schools.

(AQW 3835/10)

Minister of Education: Government has obligations under both the Good Friday Agreement and the European Charter for Regional or Minority languages to promote, facilitate and encourage the use of the Irish language in speech and in writing. Issuing documents to all schools in Irish reflects my commitment to respect the language in an appropriate way.

Cuirtear formhór na gcáipéisí chuig scoileanna trí ríomhphost ar chostas íosta. Ós rud é go seoltar cáipéisí clóite i bhformáid dhátéangach, ní féidir an costas a áireamh ar litríocht as Gaeilge a sheoladh.

The vast majority of documents are sent to schools by email at minimal cost. As printed documents are sent in a bi-lingual format it is not possible to calculate the cost of sending literature in Irish.

Emails Written in Irish to Protestant Schools

Mr D Hilditch asked the Minister of Education why her Department sends emails written in Irish to Protestant schools

(AQW 3836/10)

Minister of Education: Tá oibleagáidí ar an Rialtas faoi Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta agus faoin Chairt Eorpach do Theangacha Réigiúnacha nó Mionlaigh úsáid na Gaeilge sa chaint agus sa scríobh a chur chun cinn, a éascú agus a spreagadh. Léiríonn eisiúint de cháipéisí as Gaeilge chuig na scoileanna go léir mo thiomantas do mheas a thabhairt don teanga i mbealach atá oiriúnach.

Government has obligations under both the Good Friday Agreement and the European Charter for Regional or Minority languages to promote, facilitate and encourage the use of the Irish language in speech and in writing. Issuing documents to all schools in Irish reflects my commitment to respect the language in an appropriate way.

Anti-Bullying Publications

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Education (i) what anti-bullying publications her Department has funded and distributed to schools; and (ii) what feedback her Department has received.

(AQW 3837/10)

Minister of Education: Soláthraíonn foilseachán mo Roinne ‘Cúram Tréadach i Scoileanna: Cur Chun Cinn Iompraíochta Dearfaí’ treoir mhionsonraithe, tionscnaimh phraiticiúla agus cas-staidéir le tacaíocht a thabhairt do scoileanna chun dul i ngleic le bulaíocht. Tá sé ceaptha go spreagfaidh sé comhrá laistigh den scoil maidir le saincheist na bulaíochta agus go misneoidh sé comhfhreagracht as an tsaincheist agus na bearta a nglacfar chun déileáil léi.

My Department’s publication ‘Pastoral Care in Schools: Promoting Positive Behaviour’ offers detailed guidance, practical initiatives and case studies to support schools to tackle bullying. This guidance is intended to stimulate discussion within a school around the issue of bullying and to encourage collective ownership of the issue and the actions to be taken to counter it.

The Department cannot address the issue of bullying alone and, therefore, continues to work in close partnership with statutory and voluntary organisations through its membership and funding of the local Anti-Bullying Forum. Publications issued by the Forum are available on its website www.niabf.org.uk and I understand that any feedback received from schools has been positive.

Grammar School Places

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Education what percentage of pupils with (i) C1; (ii) C2; and (iii) D grades gained a place in a grammar school, without upgrades due to special circumstances being considered, in each of the last three academic years, in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 3852/10)

Minister of Education: Léiríonn na táblaí iata (i) líon na ndaltaí atá ag freastal ar bhunscoil i ngach ceantar Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne a bhain na gráid C1, C2 nó D amach; (ii) líon na n-iarratas a fuair scoileanna gramadaí i ngach ceantar Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne ó dhaltaí a bhain na gráid C1, C2 nó D amach; agus (iii) líon na n-iarratasóirí a bhain na gráid C1, C2 nó D amach ar glacadh leo i scoileanna gramadaí i ngach ceantar boird oideachais agus leabharlainne, i ngach bliain de na trí bliana acadúla a chuaigh thart.

The tables, attached, show (i) the number of pupils attending primary school in each Education and Library Board area who received grades C1, C2 and D; (ii) the number of applications received by grammar schools in each Education and Library Board area from pupils who received grades C1, C2 and D; and (iii) the number of applicants who received grades C1, C2 and D who were admitted to grammar schools in each Education and Library Board area, in each of the last three academic years.

Please note:

- the information available does not distinguish between pupils who received an upgrade due to special circumstances and who were admitted to a grammar school and those who did not receive an upgrade due to special circumstances and who were admitted to a grammar school;
- applicants who attended primary school in one Board area may apply to a post-primary school in another Board area, therefore, it is not possible to provide the percentages requested.

GCSE Grades

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Education to provide comparative figures for Northern Ireland and England and Wales for pupils who have, over the last three years, attained (i) 5 or more GCSE passes at grades A – C for overall subjects; (ii) 5 or more GCSE passes at grades A – C including English and Maths; (iii) 2 or more A-Level passes at grades A – E; and (iv) 1 or more Grade A at both GCSE and A-Level; and to indicate where these figures include vocational exams. (AQW 3854/10)

Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas seo ar fáil sa tábla thíos:

The information is provided in the table below:

	Year Indicator	2005/06 %	2006/07 %	2007/08 %
North of Ireland	(i)	63	64	68
	(ii)	52	52	53
	(iii)	98	98	97

	Year Indicator	2005/06 %	2006/07 %	2007/08 %
England	(i)	59	61	65
	(ii)	46	46	48
	(iii)	96	96	96
Wales	(i)	54	55	58
	(ii)	n/a	44	46
	(iii)	94	94	94

Notes:

- (i) Figures include vocational examinations equivalent to GCSE grade A*-C
- (ii) Does not include vocational exams.
- (iii) Includes vocational examinations equivalent to A level grades A-E
- (iv) The Department holds information on GCSEs and A levels separately.

For these years, it is not possible to link the two datasets at pupil level.

GCSE Grades in the Shankill and New Lodge Wards

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Education to provide comparative figures for the last three academic years, of pupils residing in the Shankill and New Lodge wards gaining 5 GCSEs at grades A- C. (AQW 3858/10)

Minister of Education: Mionsonraítear an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is detailed in the table below.

PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOL LEAVERS RESIDENT IN THE SHANKILL AND NEW LODGE WARDS ACHIEVING AT LEAST 5 GCSES A*-C (INC. EQUIVALENTS) 2005/06 TO 2007/08

	Shankill Ward			New Lodge Ward			Average
	Number	Total Leavers	%	Number	Total Leavers	%	%
2007/08	15	43	34.9	38	80	47.5	66.9
2006/07	15	44	34.1	21	56	37.5	64.7
2005/06	18	48	37.5	28	80	35.0	64.2

1. The data in the table relates to GCSE grades A*-C

Source: School Leavers Survey

Free School Meals

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Education for the percentage of pupils, in the last three years, in receipt of free school meals in (i) grammar schools; and (ii) all other schools, compared to the top 200 state schools in Britain. (AQW 3859/10)

Minister of Education: Seo a leanas an t-eolas a iarradh:

The information requested is as follows:

	School Year		
	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Grammar Schools ¹	5.6%	5.0%	4.8%
Non-Grammar Post-Primary Schools ¹	24.4%	20.8%	19.8%
England ²	13.4%	13.1%	13.4%
Scotland ³	8.1%	7.9%	7.5%
Wales ³	11.6%	11.0%	11.6%

Notes:

1. Figures are taken from the annual school meals census which provides a snapshot of the numbers taking meals on the day on which census information is gathered. Percentages are calculated on the basis of the number of pupils taking free school meals on the census day compared to the total number of pupils in attendance on that day.
2. The Department for Children, Schools and Families does not publish attainment related league tables as there are a variety of different indicators that are considered when analysing performance. Hence it is not possible to identify the top 200 state schools in Britain. The figures therefore relate to all state funded secondary schools and show the pupils eligible for free school meals on census day compared to the pupils on roll. Those eligible may choose not to take up their offer of a free school meal for various reasons eg through preference or through non-attendance on the day.
3. The Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly Government do not publish attainment related league tables either, nor do we here in the north of Ireland. The figures therefore relate to all Scottish/Welsh secondary schools and show the pupils registered and taking free school meals on census day compared to the pupils present.

Newbuild for Belfast High School

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the new build for Belfast High School. (AQW 3881/10)

Minister of Education: Tá breithmheas eacnamaíochta i leith an fhoirgnimh nua le haghaidh Ardscoil Bhéal Feirste á nuashonrú faoi láthair. A luaithe atá sé curtha faoi bhráid, breithneoidh mo Roinn an breithmheas agus tar éis dó faomhadh a fháil, beidh sé i dteideal breithniú a dhéanamh air le haghaidh clár caipitil sa todhchaí.

An Economic Appraisal (EA) for the proposed new build for Belfast High School is currently being updated. Once submitted, the EA will be considered by my Department and following approval, will be eligible for consideration for any future capital programme.

Newbuild for St Columbanus College, Bangor

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Education to outline the reasons for the delay in the new build for St Columbanus College, Bangor; and when she expects the project to be approved. [R] (AQW 3904/10)

Minister of Education: Tá an dearadh mionsonraithe críochnaithe le haghaidh Coláiste Naomh Columbanus ach tá dul chun cinn breise ag brath ar thoradh an athbhreithnithe leanúnaigh ar na tionscadail chaipitil reatha ar fad, a chinnteoidh go bhfuil siad go léir i gcomhréir leis an chreat beartais ar fad agus go mbeidh siad inchothaithe inmharthana san fhadtéarma, agus ar infaighteacht acmhainní airgeadais leorga.

The detailed design for the St Columbanus' College is complete but further progress on the scheme is dependent on the outcome of the on-going review of all current capital projects, which will ensure that all are consistent with the overall policy framework and will be viable and sustainable in the long term, and to the availability of sufficient financial resources.

Pupils Absent due to Extreme Weather Conditions

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister of Education if her Department will encourage school principals to take into account impassable roads and the temporary non-availability of school buses in rural areas at times of extreme weather conditions when recording pupils as absent. (AQW 3912/10)

Minister of Education: Soláthraíonn Ciorclán 2006/14 na Roinne, atá ar fáil ag www.deni.gov.uk/revised_circular_2006_14_-_school_attendance_absence_recording_by_schools_-_6_october_2008.pdf, comhairle do scoileanna maidir le cóid neamhláithreachta ba chóir dóibh a úsáid nuair nach bhfuil dalta i láthair ar chlárú maidine ná clárú tráthnóna.

The Department's Circular 2006/14, which is available at www.deni.gov.uk/revised_circular_2006_14_-_school_attendance_absence_recording_by_schools_-_6_october_2008.pdf, provides advice to schools on absence codes to be used by schools when a pupil is not present at morning or afternoon registration.

Registration Code O may be used to record an authorised absence in exceptional circumstances which were outside the control of the school or the pupil, such as unavailability of Education and Library Board transport or if a pupil is unable to travel due to heavy snow. The guidance also states that a school can keep the morning register open for a longer period than usual in circumstances such as bad weather or public transport difficulties, so that a pupil would not be marked 'late'.

Faughan Valley School, Derry

Mr R McCartney asked the Minister of Education what plans she has for the future use of land at the former Faughan Valley School in Derry. (AQW 3957/10)

Minister of Education: Tá talamh scoile agus réadmhaoín iar-scoil Faughan Valley faoi uinéireacht Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair. Cé go raibh Comhairle Cathrach Dhoire i dteagmháil go foirmiúil leis an Bhord chun suim a léiriú i bPáirceanna Imeartha Dhroim na hUamha a cheannach, ní dhearna an Bord aon chinneadh i dtaca leis seo go fóill.

The former Faughan Valley school lands and property remain in the ownership of the Western Education and Library Board.

Whilst Derry City Council has formally approached the Board expressing interest in acquiring the Drumahoe Playing Fields no decision has yet been taken by the Board in relation to this approach.

DEPARTMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Tuition Fees

Mr J McCallister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why students in Northern Ireland have to pay tuition fees when students in Scotland and Wales do not. (AQW 3833/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): Variable tuition fees were introduced in Northern Ireland in September 2006, in line with similar arrangements in England, to provide additional funding to help higher education institutions meet long-term challenges to maintain and improve standards, widen access, strengthen links with business and become more internationally competitive. Variable tuition fees are based on the principle that it is reasonable to ask graduates to make an increased contribution to the cost of their education.

Higher education is also a devolved matter for Scotland and Wales and student finance arrangements in these jurisdictions are a matter for each of the administrations. Eligible Scottish and non-United Kingdom European Union students studying in Scotland have their fees paid by the Student Awards Agency for Scotland. Eligible Welsh students studying in Wales do pay tuition fees but are currently eligible for a tuition fee grant to partially offset the higher fees being charged, although this grant is being phased out from academic year 2010/11.

I have commissioned an independent review of tuition fees and student finance arrangements in Northern Ireland. This review, which is currently ongoing under the chairmanship of Joanne Stuart, is expected to report in February 2010, following which there will be a public consultation.

Flights Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the number of flights booked for civil servants in his Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these flights, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3839/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The following table details the number of unused flights and the total costs incurred for each of the last five years:

Year	No of Cancellations	Cost
2004/05	3	£496
2005/06	7	£1316
2006/07	3	£622
2007/08	9	£761
2008/09	4	£326

DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Jobs Created by American Companies

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many new jobs have been created by American companies since January 2008. (AQW 3681/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): This question has been answered in terms of US-owned investment projects which have been assisted by Invest NI. Invest NI does not assist projects which only serve the local marketplace e.g. those involved in retail and distribution activities. We, therefore, do not have information relating to investment made by US-owned businesses in these sectors, or investment made by US-owned companies that are not Invest NI clients.

Between 1st January 2008 and 31st December 2009 Invest NI offered financial assistance to a range of US-owned employment-related projects. These investments expect to create 1,375 new jobs during the lifetime of the projects, and included offers to companies such as New York Stock Exchange, Cybersource and Navinet. At 31st December 2009, 382 of these jobs had been created.

Broadband Services

Mr C Boylan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment which areas will benefit from better broadband services following her recent announcement; and how many 'points-of-presence' will be in south Armagh. (AQW 3730/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: On 3 December 2009 I announced jointly with BT the Next Generation Broadband project which will deliver Next Generation Services to 85% of businesses across Northern Ireland by 2011. The exchange areas that will benefit from this investment have been listed in response to AQW 3333/10 published in the weekly answer book dated 18 December 2009.

A Point of Presence (POP) is generally a location where communications traffic is exchanged between networks owned by different companies. An example would be the Kelvin POP in Armagh. However, in the context of this enquiry it has been assumed that a point of presence is a location from where BT has been contracted to provide specific next generation broadband services.

The current plan indicates that in the Newry and Armagh constituency upgrades will take place in fourteen exchange areas. Improvements and new equipment will be undertaken at 86 cabinet locations in these exchange areas. However, not all of them may lie within constituency boundaries as telephone exchange boundaries do not precisely align to constituency boundaries and a small number may lie slightly outside the area.

Arntz Belting

Ms M Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 8611/09, if she intends to intervene, given the confirmation that the management of Derry based Arntz Belting has announced that they are entering a 90 day collective consultation on the possible closure of the company. (AQW 3766/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It is regrettable that Optibelt, the Parent Company of Arntz Belting have had to announce this consultation. It is a direct result of a continued downturn in global demand across the Optibelt Group.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment through its economic development agency, Invest NI have been in close liaison with Arntz Belting prior to the current situation.

They will continue to liaise and remain committed to doing everything within their remit to intervene where possible.

I have asked Invest NI officials to continue to keep me informed of developments.

Arntz Belting

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) to detail the level of financial or in-kind assistance provided by her Department to Arntz Belting, broken down by year; and (ii) whether any such assistance is subject to claw-back or other recovery clauses. (AQW 3800/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Arntz Belting Company Ltd have received a total of £ 3.597 million from Invest NI and its legacy agencies. A yearly breakdown is included below.

The assistance is not subject to claw-back or recovery as the company has fulfilled all its obligations under the various letters of offer.

ARNTZ BELTING - DIRECT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

LoO Number	Year of Offer	Amended	Amount	Paid to Date	Clawback
38/0	1985	1987	£1,256,000	£1,254,753	Nil
37/0	1987	1990	£1,008,000	£1,008,000	Nil
35/0	1991	1995	£1,112,580	£1,112,503	Nil
01/02/1991	1991	N/A	£188,740	£154,595	Nil
24/01/1997	2001	N/A	£239,244	£58,431	Nil
Totals			£3,804,564	£3,588,282	

OTHER FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Item	Year	Amount Paid to Consultant	Clawback
Business Health Check	2005	£4,469	Nil
Accelerated Support Fund Diagnostic	2009	£4,500	Nil
Total		£8,969	

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Accidental Misuse and Deliberate Abuse of Pesticides and Poisons

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how many cases of the (a) accidental misuse and (b) deliberate abuse of pesticides and poisons were investigated by his departmental officials in each of the past 5 years; (ii) what actions were taken in relation to these cases; and (iii) what sanctions were imposed on the individuals involved. (AQW 3653/10)

Minister of the Environment (Mr E Poots): The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is responsible for investigating reports of pollution and for instigating enforcement action where appropriate.

In the last 5 years, January 2005 to December 2009, NIEA has investigated 18 suspected incidents of water pollution as a result of accidental misuse of pesticides. NIEA do not have any records of suspected incidents of water pollution as a result of deliberate abuse of pesticides.

During the same period NIEA did not investigate any suspected incidents of water pollution as a result of accidental or deliberate misuse of poisons.

NIEA carried out extensive site investigations in each of the 18 suspected incidents referred to earlier and issued three advisory letters as a result of accidental misuse of pesticides.

Table A below details the number of incidents investigated in each of the last 5 years and when the three advisory letters were issued.

TABLE A

Year	No of Suspected Incidents	Advisory Letters Issued
2005	1	
2006	13	1
2007	2	1
2008	1	
2009	1	1
Totals	18	3

Code of Conduct and Local Government Law

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment if Mrs Iris Robinson was in breach of the councillors' Code of Conduct and local government law for not declaring a pecuniary interest in relation to the lease for the Lock Keepers Inn when it was considered at a meeting of Castlereagh Council. (AQW 3706/10)

Minister of the Environment: Castlereagh Borough Council has instigated a full investigation into local government matters raised during the recent BBC Spotlight programme concerning Councillor Iris Robinson and is committed to keeping the local government auditor fully informed of that process.

Until the outcome of the investigation (and, if necessary, any subsequent audit review) is known, it is too soon to comment on whether Councillor Robinson may have been in breach of the Northern Ireland Code of Local Government Conduct and local government legislation in relation to the granting of the lease for the Lock Keeper's Inn by Castlereagh Borough Council.

Planning Service

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how many times since 2003 Mrs Iris Robinson made representations to the Planning Service in relation to planning applications which were submitted by Ken Campbell or an organisation to which he belongs; and (ii) to list these planning applications. (AQW 3707/10)

Minister of the Environment: My Department's records indicate that since 2003 Mrs Iris Robinson made representations on 2 planning applications which were submitted by Ken Campbell or an organisation to which he belongs. The details of these applications are provided below.

However, it should be noted that the details of the Directors of a company are seldom relevant to the processing of a planning application as planning permission relates to land rather than an individual.

Planning Application	Applicant	Proposal	Location
X/2005/1391/O	Carnet Developments	Housing Development	Lands at 1-8 Ardnallevy Park, Ballydrain Road, Comber
X/2008/0086/O	Carnet Developments* *During processing applicant changed; Decision was issued under Trinity Housing Limited.	Housing Development	Lands to the rear of 1-11 Beverley Heights, 2-20 Beverley Road, 2-14 Beverley Park and 10-18 Beverley Avenue, Newtownards

This is not a definitive list and to provide accurate figures for the information requested would require both a company search and manual checking of files which is disproportionate in terms of time and cost.

Planning Service

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how many times since 2003 Mrs Iris Robinson made representations to the Planning Service in relation to planning applications which were submitted by Fred Fraser or an organisation to which he belonged; and (ii) to list these planning applications. (AQW 3708/10)

Minister of the Environment: My Department's records indicate that since 2003 Mrs Iris Robinson made representations on 1 planning application which was submitted by Fred Fraser or an organisation to which he belongs. The details of this application are provided below.

However, it should be noted that the details of the Directors of a company are seldom relevant to the processing of a planning application as planning permission relates to land rather than an individual.

Planning Application	Applicant	Proposal	Location
X/2003/0173/F	Fraser Houses NI LTD	Proposed Dwelling	Land adjacent to Old Forge Green, Movilla Road, Newtownards.

This is not a definitive list and to provide accurate figures for the information requested would require both a company search and manual checking of files which is disproportionate in terms of time and cost.

Councillors Required to Declare Interests

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment if Councillors are required to declare interests or significant gifts from a property developer if they are lobbying the Planning Service on behalf of that property developer. (AQW 3709/10)

Minister of the Environment: There is nothing to prevent councillors from lobbying the Department's Planning Service on behalf of property developers if such lobbying is in the public interest.

Councillors would however be in breach of the Northern Ireland Code of Local Government Conduct if they sought or received gifts or offers of hospitality which might be intended or might be perceived to influence their judgement on council matters (e.g. when planning applications are being considered by councils).

Councillors would also be in breach of the Code of Conduct and local government legislation if they failed to declare at council meetings when they were present any pecuniary interest they have, direct or indirect, in any matters being considered by their councils.

Recent Weather Conditions

Mr C Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment if his Department intends to introduce emergency procedures to facilitate people who have been unable to get their vehicles to MOT centres or tax their vehicles due to the recent weather conditions. (AQW 3733/10)

Minister of the Environment: My Department seeks to facilitate customers affected by adverse weather either by accommodating, where possible, those who arrive late, or by offering alternative appointments. I have no plans to introduce emergency procedures in relation to vehicle licensing.

Educator Staff

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of the Environment how many educator staff are employed by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency to work with primary schools and other groups; and where these individuals are based. (AQW 3749/10)

Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency currently have eight contract staff employed in environmental educational duties; they are located as follows:

Crawfordsburn Country Park	2
Peatlands Park	2
Carrickfergus Castle	1
Castlearchdale Country Park	1
Roe Valley Country Park	1
* NIEA Headquarters, Belfast	1

* Providing a service across all of Northern Ireland.

Caravan Parks

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment how many councils operate or have operated caravan parks. (AQW 3767/10)

Minister of the Environment: Twelve councils currently operate caravan parks. Five councils have previously operated caravan parks.

Bat Roosts

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister of the Environment (i) if his Department allows property owners to demolish buildings which are bat roosts; (ii) if his Department has instructed any property owners to demolish buildings which are bat roosts; and (iii) to outline the importance his Department places on protecting bat roosts. (AQW 3771/10)

Minister of the Environment:

- (i) It is an offence to deliberately damage or destroy a bat roost. However in certain circumstances a licence may be granted by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) to exclude bats and destroy their roost. A small number of licences are granted each year to facilitate the demolition and/or re-development of old buildings.
- (ii) NIEA does not instruct the demolition of property.
- (iii) All of the Northern Ireland bat species are listed as 'European protected species of animals' and are afforded protection under the EU Habitats Directive which is transposed into Northern Ireland law through the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995, as amended 2007. This affords protection to bats and their roosts. As such NIEA are obliged to ensure that the species that occur in Northern Ireland are adequately protected.

Gritters and Snowploughs

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment the number of (i) gritters; (ii) snowploughs which are currently registered with the Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency; and (ii) how many of these are in public / private ownership. (AQW 3772/10)

Minister of the Environment: Vehicle licensing is an excepted matter which is the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Transport. It is administered in Northern Ireland by the Driver & Vehicle Agency under a formal agreement between DoE and the Department for Transport.

Details of the number of gritters and snowploughs currently licensed by the Driver & Vehicle Agency and the numbers registered in public or private ownership are as follows:

Category	Total Number	In Public Ownership	In Private Ownership
Gritters	149	134	15
Snowploughs	8	8	0

For the purposes of these figures, DVA has deemed any vehicles which are registered to a NI Government department or agency as being in public ownership and all others as being in private ownership.

Traffic Flow

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment (i) for his assessment of the traffic flow arrangements related to the planning approval for the new Abbey School, Newry; and (ii) if he can assure the residents of the Castleowen development that they will continue to have freedom of movement as they drive, cycle or walk to and from their homes following the opening of the school. (AQW 3819/10)

Minister of the Environment: In granting planning permission for the new Abbey School, Newry, the Planning Service consulted DRD Roads Service as regards issues of access and traffic movement. DRD considered that the final plans put forward by the applicant were acceptable. Since DRD Roads Service has responsibility for road safety and traffic management, Planning Service was content to give significant weight to this advice in arriving at its decision to approve the school.

While it is recognised that the new school, like any new development, will have some impact on its immediate environs, Planning Service is content that the approved traffic arrangements and travel plan aim to provide for ease of movement for vehicular and pedestrian traffic including local residents in the vicinity of both the new school and Castleowen. I am content therefore that the arrangements are acceptable.

Article 31 Inquiry, Newtownards

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm the time-scale and start date for the Article 31 Inquiry for the three planning proposals in Newtownards. (AQW 3845/10)

Minister of the Environment: I recognise the potential economic implications associated with the proposals, including opportunities for employment generation. As such, my officials have asked the PAC to prioritise the Newtownards inquiry to follow the Sprucefield inquiry.

The final decision in terms of the scheduling of the inquiry rests with the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC). However, before setting a date the PAC has asked for clarification on one of the proposals. This relates to a Notice of Opinion to approve planning permission which recently issued for a similar food superstore by Castlebawn/Tesco for the former Abattoir site in Newtownards. The applicant has indicated that their earlier application which is one of the proposals subject to the public inquiry may be withdrawn. In the circumstances this has created uncertainty over the number of development proposals to be considered at the inquiry.

My Department is awaiting clarification from the agent for Tesco/Castlebawn in order to provide the necessary clarification for the PAC.

Planning Application by North and West Housing

Ms M Anderson asked the Minister of the Environment (i) for his assessment of the planning application by North and West Housing to build 70 dwellings on the site of the former United Technologies Factory at Bligh's Lane, Derry; and (ii) how the concerns of local residents will be addressed as part of the planning process.

(AQW 3851/10)

Minister of the Environment: (i) Outline planning permission for Social Housing on this former industrial site was granted on 27 March 2009, with a condition restricting the number of dwellings on the site to no more than 65. An application for Full Planning Permission was submitted on 11 December 2009. The Department is not yet in a position to make an assessment of the current application which is for 70 dwellings, as the statutory consultation process has not yet been completed; and

(ii) All objections and other representations which are received to the proposal will be given the fullest consideration prior to reaching a recommendation on the application and consultation with Derry City Council.

George Best Belfast City Airport

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment how many flights (i) departed from; and (ii) arrived at George Best Belfast City Airport after 9.30pm, in each month since June 2008.

(AQW 3861/10)

Minister of the Environment: The number of flights departing from and arriving at George Best Belfast City Airport after 9.30pm, in each month since June 2008 is set out below.

Month	Arrive	Depart
June 2008	18	14
July 2008	34	18
August 2008	40	13
September 2008	27	11
October 2008	16	13
November 2008	13	15
December 2008	25	11
January 2009	12	9
February 2009	30	9
March 2009	11	9
April 2009	7	10
May 2009	12	10
June 2009	14	20
July 2009	28	23
August 2009	16	11
September 2009	7	10
October 2009	3	9
November 2009	17	11
December 2009	42	29

George Best Belfast City Airport

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the penalty charges imposed for flights delayed after 9.30pm at George Best Belfast City Airport, since the review of the 1997 Planning Agreement. (AQW 3863/10)

Minister of the Environment: The Department has no legal powers to impose levels of fines for delayed aircraft. However, GBBCA introduced a Community Fund, which is a voluntary initiative which will see funds donated to charity through the Energy for Children Charitable Trust for flights arriving or departing the airport during the 'extended hours'. The amount of funds donated and their distribution is a matter for GBBCA.

DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Reduction in Rates Bills

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if his Department will consider a reduction in the rates bills for households, particularly in Mid and West Tyrone, that had no water supply over the Christmas and New Year period. (AQW 3658/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): I am unable to provide a reduction in the rates bills of households that had no water supply over the Christmas and New Year period.

While a contribution is made by each individual ratepayer towards funding regional public services, including water and sewerage services, there is no specific proportion of any individual's rates bill that can be linked to the availability or usage of any particular public service.

Legislation on Multi-Unit Residential Developments

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the establishment of a Ministerial sub-group to examine the scope for legislation on multi-unit residential developments. (AQW 3660/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The establishment of a cross departmental working group will require the agreement of Executive colleagues and I will be bringing forward proposals in this regard shortly.

Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel the annual running cost of the Northern Ireland Energy Regulator's office. (AQW 3663/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR) was established on 1 April 2007 when responsibility for the regulation of the water and sewerage industry in Northern Ireland was taken on in accordance with the provisions of the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

The following table provides details of the budget for running costs of the office since NIAUR was established.

Year	07/08	08/09	09/10
Annual Budget	7.4m	8m	8m

Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many people are employed by the Northern Ireland Energy Regulator's office. (AQW 3664/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (NIAUR) was established on 1 April 2007 when responsibility for the regulation of the water and sewerage industry in Northern Ireland was taken on in accordance with the provisions of the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.

The following table provides details of the number of people employed in NIAUR since NIAUR was established.

Year	07/08	08/09	09/10
Number of staff	60	62	70

Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how the running costs of the Northern Ireland Energy Regulator compare with other regions in the UK. (AQW 3665/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: There is no direct equivalent organisation to NIAUR and therefore no direct comparisons are possible, however the following observations may be helpful.

NIAUR is unique in that it is the only economic regulator in the UK and Ireland which regulates the Electricity, Gas and Water industries. Its statutory duties and functions are equivalent to those undertaken by both OFGEM and OFWAT in GB.

The running costs of NIAUR reflect the progressive implementation of a revised staffing structure approved by DFP, which took account of NIAUR's additional responsibility for water regulation from 2007. At 31 March 2009 OFGEM employed 315 staff and OFWAT employed 203 staff. The ROI's Commission for Energy Regulation (CER) employs 68 staff, but does not regulate the water industry. The Scottish Water Regulator (WICS) employs around 23 staff.

Although the customer base in NI is obviously much smaller than GB, this does not in itself reduce the regulatory workload. Policy analysis is broadly a fixed cost – as demanding in a small market as a larger one – but price control is broadly variable.

In addition, NIAUR's salary levels have been independently benchmarked and are lower than salaries paid for equivalent roles in other regulators and regulated utilities. NIAUR's pay ranges are broadly comparable to the equivalent NICS grades. The average salary in NIAUR as at March 2009 was lower than that paid by OFGEM, CER and WICS.

Bunkers Hill, Castlewellan

Mr J Wells asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why maps issued by NI Water and Roads Service refer to Bunkers Hill, Castlewellan as 'Paul Magorrian Park'. (AQO 552/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The maps issued by NI Water and Roads Service were based on the Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland® (OSNI®) mapping produced by Land and Property Services (LPS).

The name 'Paul Magorrian Park' as shown on the LPS (OSNI) mapping refers to an area of open space to the East of Bunkers Hill road. The name Bunkers Hill is still shown on the published mapping and refers to a section of the road leading to the centre of Castlewellan and also a local hill.

LPS (OSNI) have confirmed that the addition of the name 'Paul Magorrian Park' to that area of open space was one of a number of changes to that particular map resulting from a survey of the area carried out in 1994.

Based on OSNI practice at that time it is likely that the name was recorded from a visual nameplate at, or close to, the entrance to the area of land.

LPS (OSNI) does not have responsibility for creating place-names, therefore LPS have now written to Down District Council to clarify the official name of the area and will amend the map, if required, based on their response.

Civil Partnership Act

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total number of (i) marriages; and (ii) civil partnerships which have been registered each year since the introduction of the Civil Partnership Act, broken down by council area. (AQW 3726/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of marriages and civil partnerships registered each year since 2006 broken down by council area of registration is given in the tables below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF MARRIAGES BY COUNCIL AREA OF REGISTRATION, 2006 TO 2008

Registration Area ¹	Registration Year		
	2006	2007	2008
Northern Ireland	8,259	8,687	8,510
Antrim	281	312	262
Ards	273	268	295
Armagh	333	336	350
Ballymena	319	359	375
Ballymoney	132	109	166
Banbridge	174	165	188
Belfast	1,320	1,356	1,336
Carrickfergus	166	164	158
Castlereagh	167	209	186
Coleraine	279	280	291
Cookstown	238	224	209
Craigavon	317	362	356
Derry	458	533	485
Down	331	409	357
Dungannon	260	292	297
Fermanagh	374	417	424
Larne	134	156	138
Limavady	182	173	167
Lisburn	477	475	463
Magherafelt	227	220	196
Moyle	91	101	103
Newry & Mourne	512	534	538
Newtownabbey	213	210	228
North Down	539	551	480
Omagh	274	281	275
Strabane	188	191	187

¹ These data represent where marriages were registered. They do not necessarily reflect where either the bride or groom lived and will contain marriages of some people who lived outside Northern Ireland at time of marriage.

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS BY COUNCIL AREA OF REGISTRATION, 2006 TO 2008

Registration Area ¹	Registration Year		
	2006	2007	2008
Northern Ireland	116	111	86
Belfast	69	72	48
Derry	11	11	9
Newry and Mourne	6	5	7
All Other Districts ²	30	23	22

1 These data represent where civil partnerships were registered. They do not necessarily reflect where either partner lived and will contain civil partnerships of some people who lived outside Northern Ireland at time of civil partnership.

2 There were fewer than five civil partnerships registered in a given year in each of the other council areas.

Flights Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of flights booked for civil servants in his Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these flights, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3801/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of flights booked for civil servants in DFP but never used is not recorded by the DFP Travel Desk. This information could only be researched at disproportionate expense. The cost of any unused flights is likely to be very low as DFP's Travel booking policy allows for the majority of cancellations to be fully refunded at relatively short notice.

Hotels Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of nights in hotels booked for civil servants in his Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these hotel rooms, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3802/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of hotels booked for civil servants in DFP but never used is not recorded by the DFP Travel Desk. This information could only be researched at disproportionate expense. The cost of unused hotel bookings is likely to be very low as DFP's Travel booking policy allows for the majority of cancellations to be fully refunded at relatively short notice.

Constructing Excellence NI

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the independence of Constructing Excellence NI. (AQW 3817/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) entered into an agreement with the University of Ulster to grant fund Constructing Excellence in Northern Ireland (CEni) for a four year period from 5 April 2006 to 4 April 2010.

CPD's governance of the project is principally delivered through its participation in the CEni Management Committee which also includes representatives from the Strategic Investment Board for Northern Ireland, the University of Ulster and the Construction Industry Group for Northern Ireland.

While the Committee provides strategic direction and leadership for the CEni project, the day-to-day professional advice and expertise provided by CEni staff is managed by the University and is independent of the Management Committee and the funding bodies.

Constructing Excellence NI

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the funding streams of Constructing Excellence NI. (AQW 3818/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Constructing Excellence in Northern Ireland (CEni) is grant funded, up to a maximum of £920k, for the four year period from 5 April 2006 to 4 April 2010.

DFP's funding is provided by the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD). CPD also co-ordinates the funding contributions provided by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) and six business areas with significant construction investment programmes included in the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI).

The funding bodies and their envisaged total contributions are set out in the table below:

CENI FUNDING STREAMS

Funding Body	Estimated Total Contribution by April 2010
CPD (DFP)	£120k
SIB	£120k
DHSSPS	£120k
DSD	£120k
DE	£120k
DEL	£120k
Roads Service (DRD)	£120k
NI Water (DRD)	£80k
Totals	£920k

CEni also generates additional income from providing a range of business services to the construction industry.

Civil Service Equal Pay Settlement

Dr A McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail a definitive timeframe when Civil Servants included in the Civil Service Equal Pay settlement will receive their back pay. (AQW 3828/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is not possible to give a timescale at present. Once the offer is formally accepted by NIPSA there will be a detailed and lengthy process to be followed before payments could be made. The precise details of the process and the timescales are currently being developed but it is my intention that it should not take any longer than is absolutely necessary.

Reinvestment and Reform Initiative

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the levels of funding under the Reinvestment and Reform initiative in each of the last three years. (AQW 3843/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The RRI funding in each of the last 3 years is detailed below:

2006-07	£214,621,000.00
2007-08	£97,605,000.00
2008-09	£260,000,000.00

For the years 2006-07 and 2007-08 this represents the amount actually borrowed.

For 2008-09 the amount actually borrowed from the National Loans Fund was £16,600,000.00. The remainder relates to the funding of on-balance sheet PPP projects, permitted under revised arrangements agreed with HM Treasury.

Civil Service Equal Pay Settlement

Ms A Lo asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when affected staff can expect to receive their back pay from the Civil Service Equal Pay settlement. (AQW 3855/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is not possible to give a timescale at present. Once the offer is formally accepted by NIPSA there will be a detailed and lengthy process to be followed before payments could be made. The precise details of the process and the timescales are currently being developed but it is my intention that it should not take any longer than is absolutely necessary.

Services Contracts

Mr T Gallagher asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of (a) works and services contracts; and (b) supplies and services contracts that were awarded by Central Procurement Directorate in 2007/08 and 2008/09; and (ii) the number of (a) works and services contracts; and (b) supplies and services contracts, that were awarded to businesses based in Fermanagh and South Tyrone in 2007/08 and 2008/09. (AQW 3875/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The tables overleaf summarise the contracts awarded by Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) during the financial years 2007-08 and 2008-09 and those awarded to businesses based in Fermanagh and South Tyrone during those periods.

The tables include individual contracts, new framework agreements and contracts awarded following secondary competitions under existing framework agreements.

Purchase Orders placed using call-off arrangements under existing contracts are not included in the tables.

TOTAL NUMBER OF CONTRACTS AWARDED BY CPD

Type	2007-08	2008-09
Works and Services	43	67
Supplies and Services	567	428
Total	610	495

NUMBER OF CONTRACTS AWARDED BY CPD TO BUSINESSES BASED IN FERMANAGH AND SOUTH TYRONE

Type	2007-08	2008-09
Works and Services	3	0
Supplies and Services	Data Not available ¹	51
Total	3	5

Note:

- ¹ Prior to the introduction of the e-SourcingNI electronic tendering portal on the 8 May 2008, supplier postcode information was not recorded for supplies and services contracts.

Non-Domestic Rates

Ms M Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm whether non-domestic rates will remain restricted to the projected level of inflation throughout 2009/10 and 2010/11. (AQW 3876/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive agreed in January 2008 the levels for both the domestic and non domestic regional rates for the period 2008/09 to 2010/11. This amounted to a cash terms freeze in

the domestic regional rate and an increase of 2.7% each year for the non domestic regional rate to account for predicted inflation at that time.

This year, and exceptionally, the non domestic regional rate was frozen in cash terms as a result of the Executive Review of measures to address the economic downturn in late 2008. This has reduced the funding available for the Executive for both 2009-10 and 2010-11.

For 2010/11 the level of the regional non domestic rates will revert to that agreed in 2008, i.e a 2.7% increase. The regional domestic rate remains frozen in cash terms.

On the 7th January the Department made the Regional Rates Order to set the levels of regional rates for 2010/2011. This Statutory Rule is subject to affirmative resolution in the Assembly and so the levels set will be subject to that affirmation. The debate to affirm is expected to take place on 22 February.

Boiler Scrappage Scheme: Barnett Consequential

Mr D O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount of the Barnett consequential associated with the boiler scrappage scheme introduced in England, and if there is no Barnett consequential, to explain why. (AQW 4030/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced funding for a Greener Boiler Incentive in England during his 2009 Pre-Budget Report (PBR) statement on 9 December 2009.

Although the majority of the funding for this scheme will come from a reprioritisation of the existing budget allocation for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, an additional allocation of £20 million was made to the department as part of the PBR.

As a consequence of this decision, the Northern Ireland Executive received £0.7 million in additional capital funding for 2010-11, through the Barnett formula.

However, any and all allocations received from the Barnett Formula are unhypothecated, that is to say that they are available to the Executive to spend in correspondence with local needs and priorities.

As part of the Review of 2010-11 Spending Plans, the Executive has proposed that all the additional Barnett consequentials from the 2009 PBR are used to offset the spending pressures for 2010-11.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Fracture Liaison Service

Mr D McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans there are to establish a Fracture Liaison Service and to review service provision to support fracture patients in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, with specific emphasis on plans for such a service at the Causeway Hospital, Coleraine. (AQW 3597/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): Approximately £270,000 has been provided to the Northern Trust to fund an orthopaedic/fracture rehabilitation service which will provide a liaison service for fracture patients leaving hospital. The Commissioner advises that plans are well progressed to put this service in place for all residents in the Northern Trust area, including those who attend the Causeway Hospital.

Parkinson's Disease

Mrs C Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) if he is aware of the research published in the Journal of Movement Disorders in 2003 that reveals the annual direct cost to the Health Service of a patient diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease living at home is £4,189, a patient whose care is divided between home and an institution annual costs are £15,355, and that a patient in full-time institutional care costs the

Health Service £19,338; and (ii) what funding he is making available to allow patients to be treated at home by Parkinson's Disease nursing specialists and to save the Health Service valuable resources. (AQW 3598/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am aware that the research quoted is referenced within the NICE Guidelines for Parkinsons disease which my Department formally endorsed and issued to the HSC on 7th June 2007.

It is the responsibility of the HSC Board to plan and allocate resources to meet the needs of the population, including those with Parkinsons disease. In determining the priorities for funding, the Board will take into account local circumstances, strategic objectives established for the HSC and competing demands and pressures for a wide range of health and social care services generally.

There are currently 7 Parkinsons Disease specialist Nurses in Northern Ireland.

6 specialist nurses assess and coordinate the interventions and care required for Parkinsons Disease sufferers with colleagues who work in Community settings.

The other nurse is carrying out research into Parkinsons Disease.

Hypothermia

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many cases of hypothermia were reported in December 2009; and how many of these cases required hospital treatment, in each Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 3610/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of cases of hypothermia reported and the number of these cases requiring hospital treatment in December 2009 is not available.

Health Inequalities

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment his Department has made of health inequalities in loyalist working class communities. (AQW 3617/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This information is not available centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the costs attributable to the drafting, consultation and publication of the departmental Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy. (AQW 3619/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department holds limited information relating to the costs attributable to the drafting, consultation and publication of its Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy. A list of recorded costs incurred is as follows:

Workshop in May 2005:	£992.29
Non-Departmental staff travel and locum expenses:	£343
Full public consultation advertising costs July 2008:	£2591.84

The cost of the recent High Court case between Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child and DHSSPS has not been finalised.

I am currently giving careful consideration to the two adverse findings of the High Court ruling.

Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the cost to his Department of the High Court case on the Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy. (AQW 3620/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department holds limited information relating to the costs attributable to the drafting, consultation and publication of its Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy. A list of recorded costs incurred is as follows:

Workshop in May 2005:	£992.29
Non-Departmental staff travel and locum expenses:	£343
Full public consultation advertising costs July 2008:	£2591.84

The cost of the recent High Court case between Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child and DHSSPS has not been finalised.

I am currently giving careful consideration to the two adverse findings of the High Court ruling.

Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how the Department intends to implement the High Court ruling in relation to the Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy; and to outline the consultation process. (AQW 3621/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department holds limited information relating to the costs attributable to the drafting, consultation and publication of its Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy. A list of recorded costs incurred is as follows:

Workshop in May 2005:	£992.29
Non-Departmental staff travel and locum expenses:	£343
Full public consultation advertising costs July 2008:	£2591.84

The cost of the recent High Court case between Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child and DHSSPS has not been finalised.

I am currently giving careful consideration to the two adverse findings of the High Court ruling.

Allocation of Junior Doctors

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he can provide an assurance that the Western Health and Social Care Trust will receive a sufficient allocation of junior doctors to ensure that there is no recurrence of the shortages in obstetrics and gynaecology experienced in the Erne Hospital in August 2009, which led to a reduction in services for a two week period. (AQW 3623/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Every effort is made to ensure that sufficient allocations of junior doctors are made to each hospital each year. I acknowledge that there were specialities that experienced particular difficulties last year and I recently established a working group up to consider what mechanisms could be put in place to improve the recruitment and allocation process.

Deafblind People

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list any Health and Social Care Trusts that collect data on the number of people who are deafblind within their areas. (AQW 3624/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: All Health and Social Care Trusts collect data on the number of people registered as deafblind.

Histiocytosis

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many (i) children; and (ii) adults are currently diagnosed with histiocytosis. (AQW 3625/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Histiocytosis is the name for a range of disorders caused by an excess of white blood cells called histiocytes which attack various parts of the body.

It is not known how many (i) children; and (ii) adults are currently diagnosed with the disease; however there have been (i) 65 admissions to hospitals by children aged 0-16 and (ii) 82 admissions to hospital by adults aged 17 and over, during the last five years.

Treatment of Fibromyalgia

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there is a specific department available for the treatment of fibromyalgia; and, if not, whether he would consider introducing such a department given the debilitating effects of this condition. (AQW 3632/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The cause of fibromyalgia remains unknown. The variability of symptoms in potential sufferers means that there is difficulty in diagnosis. At present there is no dedicated fibromyalgia service and no diagnostic test or cure for the illness.

The majority of care is provided by general practitioners. Patients also have full access to a wide range of treatment and support services in secondary, primary and community care settings, including neurology services, rheumatology services and mental health services. It is a matter for commissioners to determine the need for specific service development proposals.

Picture Commemorating the 1987 Remembrance Day Bombing

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the issues surrounding the removal from Enniskillen Fire Station of a picture commemorating the 1987 Remembrance Day bombing. (AQW 3633/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) is responsible for day to day employment matters in fire stations, including the promotion of an inclusive working environment. I understand that NIFRS tried to find a locally-agreed resolution to the issue in Enniskillen Fire Station, but these efforts were unsuccessful. In the circumstances, the Chief Fire Officer decided that an alternative photographic tribute, recognising the significance of the bombing for the whole community and highlighting the work of fire-fighters at the Enniskillen bomb explosion, should be displayed. This has been on display on the wall of Enniskillen Fire Station since 13 February 2008 and no further concerns have been raised.

Care Services in the Community

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many private companies are currently contracted by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust to provide care services in the community; and to detail the locations in which these companies operate. (AQW 3634/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: At present the Southern Health and Social Care Trust commission community care services from 30 independent contractors. These contractors provide services across the entire trust area with several providing services in more than one locality.

Eight Bed Residential Scheme at Gransha Hospital

Mr J Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the Western Health and Social Care Trust is developing an eight bed residential scheme at Gransha Hospital which will cost approximately £200,000-£300,000 more to run each year than if the voluntary sector provided the service. (AQW 3635/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Western Health and Social Care Trust advises that it is building a 16 bed challenging behaviour unit on the Gransha Hospital site. The difference in running costs cited in the question is possibly a result of comparing a voluntary sector tender, which is several years old, and current revenue costs of the scheme. The Trust is satisfied that the projected running costs of the new unit reflect current costs of meeting the assessed healthcare needs of those who will be placed in the unit.

Contracting Out Public Services

Mr J Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he is aware that Government research carried out in 2008 revealed that up to 30% saving can be made by contracting out public services such as the provision of care in the community. (AQW 3636/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am unaware of any research carried out in 2008 indicating that savings of up to 30% can be made by contracting out services such as care in the community.

Care Services in the Community

Mr J Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he has any plans to follow the example in England where central government has asked the voluntary sector to take responsibility for the provision of care services in the community. (AQW 3637/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am convinced that the best way forward for the development of innovative, flexible and responsive community care services is to work with our partners in the independent and voluntary sector rather than focusing on all provision coming from one sector alone. My Department is therefore committed to the development of a mixed economy of care with a flourishing independent and voluntary sector alongside good quality public services.

In England, the commissioning of community care services is largely a matter for Local Authorities.

Care Services in the Community

Mr J Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why his Department has developed types of care services in the community which have previously been developed by the voluntary sector. (AQW 3638/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A wide range of services currently provided as health and social care had their origins within charitable activity. In this way, services have been piloted then validated to prove their worth.

Limb Amputation Procedures

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of limb amputation procedures directly related to (i) diabetes; and (ii) smoking, that have been undertaken in each of the last five years. (AQW 3649/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) The number of amputation procedures carried out in Health and Social Care Hospitals in Northern Ireland, where a diagnosis of diabetes was also recorded, in each of the last five years, are shown below;

Year	Procedures
2004/05	178
2005/06	149
2006/07	171
2007/08	160
2008/09	158

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

(ii) Information is not available on the number of amputation procedures carried out in Health and Social Care Hospitals in Northern Ireland which are directly related to smoking.

Adoption

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children, from countries outside the UK or Ireland, have been adopted by parents or families in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years, detailing the country of origin of the adopted child. (AQW 3650/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is detailed in Table 1 below. To avoid personal disclosure, figures have been presented for the five year period from 2004/05 to 2008/09. The total numbers of children adopted from countries outside the UK or Ireland during the years from 2004/05 to 2008/09 are detailed in Table 2.

TABLE 1 NUMBER OF CHILDREN FROM COUNTRIES OUTSIDE THE UNITED KINGDOM OR IRELAND ADOPTED BY PARENTS OR FAMILIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND FOR THE FIVE YEAR PERIOD FROM 2004/05 TO 2008/09 BY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

Country of Origin	Children Adopted 2004/05-2008/09
Thailand	28
China	13
Russia	11
Guatemala	6
Other Countries	12
Total	70

Notes: The five year period refers to 1 April 2004 to 31 March 2009. Children refer to those younger than 18 years. 'Other Countries' includes, Brazil, Bulgaria Mexico and several other countries. The information reported in Table 1 was provided by Health and Social Care Trusts and has not been validated by the DHSSPS.

TABLE 2 NUMBER OF CHILDREN FROM COUNTRIES OUTSIDE THE UNITED KINGDOM OR IRELAND ADOPTED BY PARENTS OR FAMILIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND DURING THE YEARS FROM 2004/05 TO 2008/09

Year	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Children Adopted	11	14	11	11	23

Notes: Year refers to the period from 1 April to 31 March. Children refer to those younger than 18 years. Information reported in Table 2 was provided by Health and Social Care Trusts and has not been validated by the DHSSPS.

Counter-Fraud Services

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the counter fraud services that are currently operating in the Health Service. (AQW 3676/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Operational counter fraud services in the Health Service are centralised in a specialist fraud investigation team located in the Business Services Organisation. This team consists of accredited, experienced fraud investigators, whose role is to conduct formal criminal investigations into cases of suspected fraud. Extensive verification and investigative work is also carried out in relation to claims made by patients regarding exemption from statutory Health Service charges for prescriptions, dental and ophthalmic treatment.

Cancer Survival Rate

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cancer survival rate of (i) males; and (ii) females. (AQW 3684/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Cancer Registry provides accurate, timely information on cancers occurring in the population of Northern Ireland for research, planning and education, so the burden of disease may be reduced. The latest report detailing the survival of cancer patients in Northern Ireland Survival of cancer patients in Northern Ireland: 1993-2004, which was published in October 2007, can be accessed at:

<http://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/nicr/FileStore/PDF/Survival/Filetoupload,81422,en.pdf>

Ryan Report

Mrs C Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the debate in the Assembly on the Ryan Report motion on 2 November 2009, for an update on his Department's work to encourage victims of institutional child abuse to come forward and seek assistance. (AQW 3691/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As you are aware my officials are currently preparing a paper for the Executive based on the information which is already known to them. Once all relevant information is available to me for consideration I will be in a position to bring detailed proposals forward to the Executive, in the near future.

Any decision on the way forward will be for the Executive as a whole.

Current arrangements are that victims can consult their GP who can then make an appropriate referral for treatment and/or counselling. Victims can also contact social services for advice, counselling and support. Voluntary organisations such as the NEXUS Institute which deals confidentially with those who have suffered sexual abuse can also be contacted.

Multiple Sclerosis

Mrs C Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis have been involved in the beta interferon drugs study which led to the Risk Sharing Scheme; and what assessment he has made of the progress of this scheme for the provision of MS disease-modifying drugs. (AQW 3692/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are currently 188 patients from Northern Ireland involved in the multiple sclerosis (MS) risk sharing scheme at the Royal Victoria Hospital, which is one of 70 participating centres throughout the UK.

As at 30 November 2009, 1006 patients in Northern Ireland were receiving disease modifying drugs, which include beta interferon drugs, for the treatment of MS; no patients were waiting more than 13 weeks to begin their treatment.

Data from the first two years of the scheme have been collected, analysed and interpreted by an independent advisory group, chaired by Professor Richard Lilford of Birmingham University. A paper outlining the results can be found on the British Medical Journal's website http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/339/dec02_1/b4677

Treatment for Slips or Falls on Snow or Ice

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people who have (i) required surgery; and (ii) been treated for fractures caused by slips or falls on snow or ice since 1 December 2009, broken down by (a) Health and Social Care Trust; and (b) hospital. (AQW 3696/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is not yet possible to give an accurate assessment of the number of people who have (i) required surgery and (ii) been treated for fractures caused by slips or falls on snow or ice since 1 December 2009.

Arthritis Care

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline Belfast Health and Social Care Trust's future plans for arthritis care. (AQW 3697/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust currently provides a range of medical, nursing and support services for people with arthritis. Treatment of people with arthritis is delivered by a range of health and social care professionals including rheumatologists, GPs, nurses, pharmacists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists in hospitals and in the community.

Musgrave Park Hospital, in the Belfast HSC Trust area, also supplies a regional rheumatology service for Northern Ireland.

Joint Replacements

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the cost to the Health Service of joint replacements in the last financial year. (AQW 3698/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: 2008/09 costs are not available.

TNF Drugs

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the cost to the Health Service of using TNF drugs in the last financial year. (AQW 3699/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In the financial year 2008-09 the health service spent £11,559,515 on anti-TNF drugs. This amount relates to the cost of the drugs only; costs for the associated infrastructure to deliver the treatment are not available. Anti-TNF drugs are used to treat a number of conditions and the table below provides a breakdown by specialty.

Specialty	Anti-TNF drug spend
Rheumatology	£8,475,344
Gastroenterology	£1,547,930
Dermatology	£1,536,241

Vagus Nerve Stimulation

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are currently on the Royal Victoria Hospital waiting list for Vagus nerve stimulation. (AQW 3754/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are currently two patients waiting for Vagus nerve stimulation at the Royal Victoria Hospital.

EEG Telemetry Scan

Mrs M O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are currently on the waiting list for an EEG Telemetry scan; and what the average waiting time is. (AQW 3824/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are currently 51 adults waiting for an EEG Telemetry scan, with an average waiting time of 175 days. Additionally, there are ten children waiting for an EEG Telemetry scan, currently waiting between 60 and 90 days. All patients are waiting for this procedure at the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.

Tenders from Taxi Companies

Mr T Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 2059/10, (i) how many tenders from taxi companies were received by each Health and Social Care Trust in (a) 2007/08; and (b) 2008/09; and (ii) the value of each of these tenders. (AQW 3847/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Taxis may be used by Health and Social Care Trusts for various purposes, for example, the transportation of blood, medical records, equipment, staff, clients or patients. Most of the expenditure is incurred on the transport of patients and clients.

In relation to the Northern, South Eastern and Northern Ireland Ambulance Service HSC Trusts no tenders were received for the period in question.

As regards the Belfast HSC Trust no tenders were received in 07/08. 11 tenders were received in 2008/09 and the successful one has an annual value of £1m.

In terms of the Southern HSC Trust, there was one tendering process undertaken during 2007 through the Regional Supplies Service covering the period 1st August 2007 to 31st July 2012. 23 bids were received and 18 companies have been used over the period to date. The annual value is approximately £1m.

As regards the Western HSC Trust no tenders were received in 07/08. 17 tenders were received in 2008/09 and the one accepted has an annual value of £0.5m.

DEPARTMENT FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Water Infrastructure

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will invest capital expenditure to enhance the water infrastructure, including upgrading booster pumps and increasing reservoir storage capacity in parts of County Tyrone where hundreds of families had no water supply over the Christmas and New Year period. (AQW 3662/10)

Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it is satisfied the existing water infrastructure in County Tyrone, including service reservoirs, is adequate to meet demand for water under normal circumstances. However, due to the adverse weather conditions over the Christmas and New Year period, there was a substantial increase in demand for water caused by burst watermains and leaks within private property.

In order to improve the water distribution system and to reduce the risk of interruptions to the water supply, NIW will continue to undertake capital projects in County Tyrone including:-

- a major trunk main scheme to transfer water from Castor Bay to Dungannon and increase some service reservoir capacity, at a capital cost of approximately £18 million;
- construction of a new intake from the Strule River to provide additional water, at a cost of approximately £3.5 million; and
- watermains extension on the Creggan Road, Carrickmore and watermains replacement at Mullaghbane and Cornavarrow Road, Clanabogan.

In addition a detailed Watermain Rehabilitation Zonal Study is currently being undertaken for the Omagh water supply zone to examine the structural, water quality, hydraulic and operational performance of the water supply network. The Study, which is scheduled for completion in April 2011, will make recommendations for any improvements required to the water infrastructure.

NIW is also preparing a Water Resources Management Plan to assess the adequacy of the water supply network, including reservoir capacities and the security of supply provided. The Report, which is expected to be completed in draft form in April 2010, will identify measures required to improve and sustain the water network.

Road Salting

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development if he plans to increase the frequency of road salting, given the forecast of a prolonged cold spell. (AQW 3669/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Firstly, I should explain that the aim of winter service is to help, as far as possible, traffic on the busier main through routes, to move safely and freely in wintry conditions by spreading

salt at the most effective times. I am pleased to report that Roads Service has achieved this objective during the recent very cold spell.

My Department's Roads Service has advised that there is no upper limit to the number of salting treatments, which may be applied to the through routes, on the existing salting schedule. Therefore, at present there are no plans to change the current policy.

Road Salting

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he has given to extending the current salting of 'A' road routes to 'B' road routes and footpaths. (AQW 3671/10)

Minister for Regional Development: One of the key outcomes of the most recent review of my Department's Winter Service policy, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, was that the practice of targeting the limited resources available for this service on the busier main through routes should continue.

In general, this means that Roads Service salts the North's main through routes that carry more than 1,500 vehicles per day and, in exceptional circumstances, roads with difficult topography, carrying between 1,000 and 1,500 vehicles per day. The application of this policy ensures that 28% of the total road network, which carries around 80% of traffic, is salted, at an annual cost of approximately £5m. An extension of the salting schedule to cover 90% or 100% of traffic volumes would increase the cost to approximately £10m or £20m per annum, respectively.

At the time of the review, it was recognised that the cost of salting footways was prohibitive, and that the basic logistics of introducing such a service, which is largely a manual task, made it impractical. Roads Service does, however, provide salt boxes at strategic locations, which can be used by the general public on a self help basis, to help prevent the formation of snow and ice on pavements and roads.

The Member will appreciate that there is a fine balance to be drawn between putting even more funds into salting, or continuing to spend it on the many other worthwhile demands on Roads Service's limited resources.

It is considered that circumstances have not changed significantly since the last review was carried out and, as such, there are currently no plans to extend the criteria, to include other roads.

Salt and Sand Boxes

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he has given to increasing the number of salt and sand boxes in areas of high housing density. (AQW 3672/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service already has in place procedures to provide salt bins or grit piles, for use by the public on a self-help basis, on roads that do not qualify for inclusion on the gritting schedule.

Roads Service has advised that provided the necessary criteria are met, there are no limits placed on the number of salt boxes which may be provided, although they will not normally be provided within 100m of an existing salt box.

The Member will appreciate that Roads Service already commits significant resources to maintain approximately 3,500 salt bins provided on public roads. In these circumstances, there are currently no plans to change the criteria for the provision of salt boxes.

Salting of Routes for Funeral Processions

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development what protocols are in place for the salting of routes for funeral processions; and if he has any plans to review them. (AQW 3688/10)

Minister for Regional Development: One of the key elements of my Department's Roads Service's winter service policy is the practice of targeting the limited resources available for this service on the busier main through routes.

While there are no formal arrangements in place for the salting of routes for funeral processions, it is Roads Service practice to treat such routes, wherever possible. This practice appears to work well, and I have no plans to review the current arrangements, at this time.

Attacks on Gritters and Spreading Vehicles

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of attacks on gritters and spreading vehicles since the start of December 2009; and (ii) the cost of the damage. (AQW 3700/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that there have been 16 attacks on gritters and spreading vehicles since the start of December 2009.

The damage has cost Roads Service £1,060.00

Easibus Drivers

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans Translink has for the two Easibus drivers if the service is withdrawn in Bangor. (AQW 3711/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink has advised me that following the withdrawal of the Easibus service in Bangor in June 2010, the two drivers will be deployed within the Bangor Depot. No redundancies will be made due to the alteration to Easibus services in the town.

Easibus Service

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development the frequency of the Easibus service provided in Bangor each day. (AQW 3715/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink has advised me that currently two buses provide Easibus services in Bangor. Each bus provides four journeys daily (Monday to Friday) on two routes equating to 16 journeys per day. On Saturdays each bus provides four journeys on one route equating to 8 journeys.

Road Gritting

Mr A Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of road gritting in each month of (i) 2007; (ii) 2008; and (iii) 2009. (AQW 3716/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service maintains its expenditure on Winter Service by financial year. Details of expenditure on Winter Service for financial years 2006/07, 2007/08 and 2008/09 is provided in the table below:

Month	Winter Maintenance Spend		
	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
April	0	0	0
May	0	£329,000	0
June	£607,000	£151,000	£931,000
July	£196,000	£167,000	£175,000
August	£173,000	£289,000	-£123,000
September	£392,000	£67,000	£33,000
October	£111,000	£411,000	£431,000
November	£831,000	£318,000	£696,000
December	£346,000	£598,000	£1,317,000

Month	Winter Maintenance Spend		
	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
January	£541,000	£815,000	£1,294,000
February	£629,000	£697,000	£1,370,000
March	£617,000	£841,000	£675,000
Year Total	£4,443,000	£4,683,000	£6,799,000

Notes:

1. These figures include costs for procurement of forecasting services and maintenance of weather stations.
2. Roads Service operate on a Resource Accounting basis. This means that Work in Progress accrual costs are input to account for costs incurred but not yet paid. The negative figure in August 2008 relates to corrections and estimations. However, the year end figure represents the total consumption in the financial year 08-09.
3. Expenditure on Winter Service in the summer months is due to the purchase of salt. During this time the price of salt is cheaper and it makes good business sense for Roads Service to fill their salt barns at this time.

Expenditure details of Winter Service for the financial year 2009/2010 are not currently available.

Gritting

Mr A Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development if there are priority areas for gritting around the facilities where emergency services are located. (AQW 3717/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that its Winter Service policy does not specifically provide for the salting of areas around the facilities where emergency services are located. Local agreements are in place that facilitates the gritting of routes inside hospital grounds. It is generally considered that most emergency services would have direct access to the salted road network. However, Roads Service may, subject to the availability of resources, undertake additional salting in the case of an emergency, for example, at accesses for the emergency services or other unforeseen circumstances, such as a funeral.

Overtime Bill for Gritting

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount of hours and cost of his Department's overtime bill for gritting each week since the start of December 2009. (AQW 3727/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Details of the approximate weekly hours and cost of overtime worked by industrial staff in my Department's Roads Service in connection with gritting and snow clearance each week, since the start of December 2009 to 6 January 2010, are provided in the table below:

Pay Week Ending	Overtime Hours	Cost
9 December 2009	1,012	£9,776
16 December 2009	1,141	£11,612
23 December 2009	3,746	£49,260
30 December 2009	7,323	£87,355
6 January 2010	7,125	£81,937

Roads Service does not maintain separate details of the hours and cost of overtime worked by its non-industrial staff in relation to winter service duties.

Door-to-Door Service

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many passengers used the Door-to-Door service in each of the last three years. (AQW 3734/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The information is not available in the format requested.

The table below sets out the number of trips taken by members of the Door-to-Door transport scheme in the last three financial years.

Period	Number of Trips
April 2007 to March 2008	44,887
April 2008 to March 2009	123,281
April 2009 to November 2009	101,071

Door-to-Door Service

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development the projected cost to his Department of the Door-to-Door service in 2010/11. (AQW 3735/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The projected cost to my Department for the operation of door-to-door transport in Belfast and Derry for the year 2010/2011 is £1m. My Department is currently undertaking a procurement exercise for the provision of door-to-door services in the other 27 towns and cities where the scheme operates and the projected cost for these other areas will depend on the outcome. However the cost of the service for these areas in the current financial year is expected to be £2.2m.

Door-to-Door Service

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development the cost to his Department of the Door-to-Door service in 2009/10. (AQW 3736/10)

Minister for Regional Development: For the period from April 2009 to December 2009 the actual cost to my Department for the operation of Door-to-Door services, including those in Belfast and Derry, was £2,232,208.78.

It is anticipated that the cost for the remainder of the financial year will be about £750,000.

Annual Grants

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development the cost of annual grants to Translink or other organisations for increased access to public transport for people with disabilities, in each of the last three years. (AQW 3737/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The table below sets out the grants paid by the Department in each of the last three financial years to increase access to public transport for people with disabilities. This includes support to Translink for the purchase of new buses and the upgrade of railway stations and halts in accordance with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995. These figures also include support to door-to-door services in urban areas and to Rural Community Transport Partnerships in rural areas to assist people with problems of accessibility, including those arising as a result of disability.

	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Transport Programme for People with Disabilities (including Easibus)	£1,518,000	£4,501,000	£3,587,000
Rural Transport Fund	£1,808,000	£3,240,000*	£2,666,000
Bus purchase	£19,035,000	£48,791,000	£6,616,000
DDA Compliance – Station Halt Upgrade	£120,000	£8,656,100	£1,316,400

* Includes capital grant expenditure of £1.3 million for replacement purchase of accessible minibuses for Rural Community Transport Partnerships.

Salt Boxes

Mr A Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the location of salt boxes available to the public in each council area. (AQW 3744/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it maintains approximately 3,500 salt bins on public roads across the North. In light of the number of salt bins currently in use and the demands that it would place on finite staff resources in collating this information, I would ask the Member to direct any queries he has regarding the provision/location of salt boxes in specific areas to the relevant local Roads Service Section Office.

Salt Boxes

Mr A Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development how Roads Service (i) monitors the use of salt boxes; and (ii) ensures that salt boxes are filled, particularly during cold periods when roads are icy. (AQW 3747/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it maintains approximately 3,500 salt bins at pre-agreed strategic locations on public roads across the North, which meet the required criteria. These boxes are filled with road salt, and subsequently monitored on a regular basis, including during the cyclical highway inspections.

During hazardous weather conditions, the replenishment of salt boxes is given a high priority. Depending upon the prevailing weather conditions, and the specific quantities used by the public, Roads Service will endeavour to maintain these boxes with salt supplies, and any requests for salt replenishment are duly actioned, as resources permit.

During the recent exceptional period of cold weather, which began on 17 December 2009, squads were employed to replenish salt boxes. Roads Service was inundated with requests to refill salt boxes during this period. Unfortunately, after refilling, the salt was sometimes completely removed from many boxes, frequently on the same day and often by people for use in other areas. This made it very difficult to keep up with the demand for replenishment.

Portaferry Ferry Messaging Signage

Mr K McCarthy asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the Portaferry ferry messaging signage. (AQW 3752/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that work is continuing on the variable message signs for the Strangford Lough Ferry Service. Unfortunately, this work has taken longer than originally anticipated, as some of the electronic parts required have had to be specially manufactured.

It is now anticipated that five of the six signs will be operational by the end of January 2010. The remaining sign at the Portaferry Rd, Newtownards, is being re-located to the junction with the Old Shore Road, so that it can be seen by traffic approaching from the new bypass. However, as civil and electrical work is required at the new location, this sign may not be operational until the end of February 2010.

Planning Applications

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he would consider increasing the numbers of officers in the Roads Section in Downpatrick due to the excessive delays in processing planning applications. (AQW 3769/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, at present, staffing levels within the Development Control Section in Downpatrick are sufficient to deal with the current volume of planning application consultations. Internally monitored monthly performance figures, for the processing of applications received from the relevant Planning Office, show that Downpatrick Development Control Section meets, or exceeds the relevant Roads Service target and in this respect, is on a par with other Development Control Sections within Roads Service.

However, delays in individual applications can occur for a number of reasons including, poor initial applications and delayed, or the absence of, responses from applicants, or applicants' agents, to queries posed by Roads Service.

Roads Service will continue to monitor performance in this section to ensure that it maintains its standards in this regard.

Free Travel for Companions

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development if he would consider introducing free travel for (i) those who accompany a person with epilepsy to essential health appointments; (ii) those who accompany Blind or Partially-Sighted people; and (iii) those who accompany people with other disabilities when using public transport. (AQW 3770/10)

Minister for Regional Development: As part of the last Comprehensive Spending review I made bids for the resources to extend the concessionary fares scheme. Those bids did not include companion travel. Resources were made available for the 60 plus scheme but not for other changes. Were additional resources to be available, my priority would be in relation to groups already bid for and not to provide concessionary travel to the groups described in the question.

Cost of Supplying and Maintaining Grit Boxes

Mrs C Hanna asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of supplying and maintaining a grit box. (AQW 3775/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the average cost of supplying and maintaining a grit box is approximately £150.00 for the first year. This figure includes the capital cost for the provision of the grit box and also the average costs associated with the winter replenishment cycle.

Detailed costs cannot be supplied as the information is commercially sensitive.

Door-to-Door Service

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development the cost to his Department of the Door-to-Door service in the Bangor area during the last year. (AQW 3782/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The information is not available in the form requested as Bangor and Holywood are treated as a single contract area.

In the 2008/2009 financial year, the cost to my Department for the operation of the Door-to-Door service in the Bangor and Holywood operational area was £232,765.

Door-to-Door Service

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what percentage of requests for the Door-to-Door service have been accepted and delivered. (AQW 3783/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been informed by the operators that since September 2006 when services began until November 2009, over 98% of requests to use the service have been accepted and delivered.

Door-to-Door Service

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many requests for the Door-to-Door service have been made by Bangor residents in each of the last three years. (AQW 3784/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The table below shows the number of trips requested by Bangor members of the Door-to-Door transport scheme in each of the last three financial years. In the 2007/08 financial

year Bangor and Holywood were treated as one operational area and a small number of requests made by Holywood members are included in that figure.

Period	Number of Requests
April 2007 to March 2008	5,389
April 2008 to March 2009	14,418
April 2009 to November 2009.	11,732

Door-to-Door Service

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many passenger journeys the Door-to-Door service has carried out in Bangor in each of the last three years. (AQW 3785/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The Table below sets out the number of passenger trips made by Bangor members of the Door-to-Door transport scheme in the last three financial years. In the 2007/08 financial year Bangor and Holywood were treated as one operational area and a small number of trips made by Holywood members are included in that figure.

Period	Number of Passenger Trips
April 2007 to March 2008	5,195
April 2008 to March 2009	13,816
April 2009 to November 2009	11,339

Gritting Pavements

Mrs C Hanna asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his Department's policy on gritting pavements. (AQW 3825/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has no statutory obligation to salt roads or footways. However, to assist the safe movement of traffic in wintry conditions, Roads Service applies salt on the main traffic routes across the North.

During the most recent review of my Department's Winter Service policy, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, it was recognised that the cost of salting footways was prohibitive and that the basic logistics of introducing such a service, which is largely a manual task, make it impractical.

That said, you will be aware that Roads Service does provide salt boxes (approximately 3,500 at present) at strategic locations, which can be used by the general public on a self help basis to help prevent the formation of snow and ice on pavements and roads.

Easibus Services in Bangor

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department has carried out an Equality Impact Assessment on proposals about the future of Easibus services in Bangor. (AQW 3827/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department has not carried out an Equality Impact Assessment on the future of Easibus services in Bangor as this is an operational matter for Translink and does not represent a change to Departmental policy

Easibus Services in Bnagor

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many passengers used the Easibus service in Bangor in each of the last three years. (AQW 3829/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The table below sets out the number of passenger trips made on Bangor Easibus services in each of the last three financial years.

Period	Number of Passenger Trips
2006/07	24,530
2007/08	26,048
2008/09	23,286

Easibus Service in Bangor

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development the cost to his Department of providing the Easibus service in Bangor, in each of the last three years. (AQW 3831/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department has provided funding to Translink to operate two of the four Easibus services in Bangor. The table below shows the cost to the Department in each of the last three financial years.

Period	Funding (£)
2006/07	37,500
2007/08	37,700
2008/09	38,400

Winter Tyres

Mr D Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will consider introducing a policy to allow vehicles owned by Local Government or Government Departments, such as bin lorries, school buses and ambulances to have access to winter tyres. (AQW 3844/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I can advise the Member that my Department does not have a policy concerning the use of winter tyres by its vehicles.

Translink and Roads Service have both advised that they do not consider there is a need to use winter tyres on their vehicles, at this time.

Policy on the use of winter tyres by other vehicles in the public sector, would be a matter for the relevant service provider.

Door-to-Door Service

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development why the Door-to-Door service can only collect one person at a time in the Ards area. (AQW 3846/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I can confirm that the Door-to-Door transport service in Newtownards can and does transport more than one person at a time. However, this is a demand responsive service and, although every effort is made by the operator to utilise capacity fully, the numbers being carried at any one time will be dependent on the number of members wanting to travel at that time along the same or similar route.

Door-to-Door Service

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development when the contract for the Door-to-Door service is due for renewal. (AQW 3849/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The current contract for the provision of Door-to-Door services in all operational areas other than Belfast and Derry is due for renewal on 25 May 2010. The contracts for Belfast and Derry are due to end in April 2011 and September 2011 respectively, with an option to extend each for an additional year.

DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Social Housing Newbuilds

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development (i) to detail the number of social housing new builds in (a) North Belfast; (b) West Belfast; and (c) Foyle in each of the last three years; (ii) to show these figures as a percentage of total new build social housing in Northern Ireland; and (iii) for a breakdown of the people allocated these properties by religious denomination. (AQW 3571/10)

Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie): The table below shows the number of new build social housing units started in each of the last three years for North Belfast, West Belfast, and the West Bank in Derry / Londonderry. The figures in brackets show the percentage share of the units started in these three areas against the total units started in each year.

	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
North Belfast	135 (13.08%)	298 (18.68%)	234 (20.6%)
West Belfast	120 (11.63%)	202 (12.66%)	27 (2.38%)
West Bank (Derry)	146 (14.15%)	160 (10.03%)	140 (12.32%)

The Housing Executive does not have records of the religious denomination of the people allocated to these properties. However, the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations does record the socio-economic characteristics of new housing association tenants as shown in the three tables below. Note: the Federation's figures are for new build lettings which includes 'off the shelf' new housing, and their definitions for North Belfast, West Belfast, and West Bank Derry / Londonderry are not identical to those of the Housing Executive, and therefore the totals are not exactly the same as the Housing Executive figures.

	North Belfast (BT14 & BT15)		
	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Protestant	70 (44%)	40 (26%)	7 (8.5%)
Catholic	83 (52.2%)	111 (72%)	72 (87.8%)
Mixed	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
No religious belief	2 (1.3%)	1 (0.6%)	1 (1.2%)
Other religion	4 (2.5%)	2 (1.3%)	2 (2.4%)
Total	159 (100%)	154 (100%)	82 (100%)

Community Household Belongs To	West Belfast (BT11 & BT12)		
	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Protestant	39 (13.4%)	14 (6.8%)	10 (19.2%)
Catholic	245 (84.5%)	184 (89.8%)	40 (76.9%)
Mixed	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.9%)
No religious belief	5 (1.7%)	5 (2.4%)	1 (1.9%)
Other religion	1 (0.3%)	2 (1%)	0 (0.0%)
Total	290 (100%)	205 (100%)	52 (100%)

	Foyle (BT48)		
	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Protestant	7 (8.5%)	2 (3.6%)	1 (1.1%)
Catholic	71 (86.6%)	52 (96.0%)	88 (98.9%)
Mixed	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
No religious belief	3 (3.7%)	1 (1.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Other religion	1 (1.2%)	1 (1.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Total	82 (100%)	56 (100%)	89 (100%)

Properties in Dunclug Deemed Unfit

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Social Development how many (i) publicly-owned; and (ii) privately-owned houses in Dunclug are currently deemed unfit. (AQW 3599/10)

Minister for Social Development: There are five publicly-owned vacant dwellings in Dunclug considered derelict and due for demolition in 2010. The Housing Executive, in co-operation with Ballymena Borough Council Environmental Health Department, has identified three unfit privately owned properties in the area.

Properties in Dunclug Deemed Unfit

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Social Development how many owners of private properties in Dunclug has the Housing Executive initiated statutory action against because their properties have been deemed unfit; and to detail what action has been taken. (AQW 3600/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has identified three unfit privately owned properties in Dunclug and their officials have met with the relevant owners and one has agreed to complete the necessary remedial repairs. The Housing Executive has sought to use its statutory powers to resolve the situation in respect of the remaining two properties and is currently in the process of securing the registration of Closing Orders (under Article 38 Housing Order (NI) 1981). The Housing Executive will continue to seek to resolve this situation as quickly as possible.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the current spend to date in each Neighbourhood Renewal area. (AQW 3601/10)

Minister for Social Development: The table below details expenditure by the Department for Social Development's Regeneration Offices, in each of the 36 Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, between 2003/04 and 2008/09.

TABLE 1: NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL EXPENDITURE 2003/04 – 2008/09

	Neighbourhood Renewal Area	£ (thousands)
1	Andersonstown	£1,991
2	Armagh	£2,139
3	Ballyclare	£563
4	Ballymena	£3,895
5	Bangor	£1,521
6	Brownlow	£2,905
7	Cityside	£26,335

	Neighbourhood Renewal Area	£ (thousands)
8	Coalisland	£718
9	Coleraine (East)	£1,969
10	Coleraine (West)	£1,769
11	Colin	£5,747
12	Crumlin/Ardoyne	£5,627
13	Downpatrick	£2,545
14	Dungannon	£610
15	Enniskillen	£411
16	Greater Falls	£9,877
17	Greater Shankill	£11,631
18	Inner East Belfast	£11,450
19	Inner North Belfast	£7,621
20	Inner South Belfast	£5,227
21	Ligoniel	£783
22	Limavady	£1,405
23	Lurgan	£2,661
24	Newry	£3,533
25	North West Portadown	£660
26	Omagh	£1,309
27	Outer North (NWDO)	£6,496
28	Outer West (NWDO)	£2,997
29	Outer West Belfast(Lenadoon)	£1,743
30	Rathcoole	£270
31	South West Belfast	£6,065
32	Strabane	£6,303
33	Tullycarnet	£1,372
34	Upper Ardoyne / Ballysillan	£3,423
35	Upper Springfield / Whiterock	£4,270
36	Waterside	£20,825

Notes:

1. Figures include; Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund capital and revenue expenditure, expenditure from physical regeneration programmes (Urban Development Grants, Comprehensive Development, Environmental Improvements Schemes and Public Realm).
2. An additional £970,000 expenditure on projects which benefit more than one area has not been allocated in the table.
3. Caution is advised in making comparisons of expenditure across Neighbourhood Renewal Areas. The expenditure is influenced by factors such as; the population of the area, the date of the formation of the Partnership, the historic expenditure in an area and the needs identified in Action Plans. The Cityside and Waterside Neighbourhood Renewal Areas in the North West encompass the city centre and this has a significant impact on the level of expenditure reported for those areas. Belfast City Centre is not located within a Neighbourhood Renewal Area boundary.

Neighbourhood Renewal Projects

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how much additional finance has been leveraged in from (i) Northern Ireland Housing Executive; (ii) Roads Service; (iii) Health Trusts; (iv) Education and Library Boards; (v) PSNI; and (vi) other agencies, to assist in funding Neighbourhood Renewal projects. (AQW 3602/10)

Minister for Social Development: Neighbourhood Renewal Areas and the residents therein are already among the biggest recipients of public funding in Northern Ireland. The priorities identified in Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans are resourced and delivered by various means. My Department has committed £60m of its CSR allocation to Neighbourhood Renewal. Other Departments and agencies support Neighbourhood Renewal actions in a number of ways, such as; joint funding, provision of benefits in kind and through the mainstream provision of services.

It is not possible to quantify how much additional finance has been allocated to activities in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas. Other Government Departments have highlighted the means by which additional resources are skewed towards disadvantaged areas, groups or individuals. For example; DE allocates additional funding on the basis of levels of Free School Meals Entitlement (FSME), this directs additional resources to schools whose catchment areas correlate strongly with Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, the DHSSPS Investing for Health Strategy has a particular focus on the most disadvantaged areas and DEL have a range of skills programmes which target individuals in the most disadvantaged areas.

My Department is working with all providers to examine the delivery of their existing services and to seek tailored improvements that would ensure more effective and efficient delivery.

Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Board

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development for the religious background of the members of each Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Board. (AQW 3604/10)

Minister for Social Development: My Department does not hold this information. Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships are bodies whose membership includes representation from the statutory, private and voluntary and community sectors. The composition of individual Neighbourhood Partnerships reflects local circumstances bringing together the different parts of the public, private, business and community and voluntary sectors so that different initiatives and services support each other and work together.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the geographical areas covered by each of the Winter Fuel Payments made to date. (AQW 3639/10)

Minister for Social Development: Entitlement to a Winter Fuel Payment is not dependent on geographical factors. Anyone living within Northern Ireland may therefore receive their annual payment so long as they meet the qualifying conditions.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the process for prioritising Winter Fuel Payments. (AQW 3640/10)

Minister for Social Development: Individuals are entitled to a Winter Fuel Payment if they meet the qualifying conditions. The issue of prioritisation only applies in relation to when the payment is made. People who get their payments automatically can normally expect to receive their payment from early November but before Christmas as will those whose first claim is received this year by 27 September 2009. All claims received after that date until the closing date of 30 March 2010 will normally be paid as soon as possible in 2010.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many Winter Fuel Payments (i) had been made by 1 January 2010; and (ii) have yet to be made. (AQW 3641/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is provided by the Department for Work and Pensions and is not expected to be available until August 2010.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many Winter Fuel Payments were made in each of the last five years. (AQW 3642/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the Table below:

Year	Number of recipients	Number of Households
2004/05	283,843	208,700
2005/06	286,068	211,186
2006/07	293,267	216,079
2007/08	300,615	220,761
2008/09	307,223	225,537

Link Road Outlined in the Dunclug Action Plan

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Social Development when the new link road outlined in the Dunclug Action Plan will be completed. (AQW 3654/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Dunclug Link Road forms part of phase 2 of the Housing Executive's Environmental Improvement Scheme for the area.

Unfortunately due to the collapse of the land and property market the resources for schemes such as this are not currently available.

As such the Housing Executive are not currently able to state when this scheme will begin, however they remain committed to it and will keep the situation under close review.

Central Heating

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Social Development in how many instances (i) families with children; and (ii) pensioners, were given single heaters by the Housing Executive when their central heating broke down over the past two months. (AQW 3655/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive does not collate the information in the format requested. However,

they provided two temporary heaters each to 25 households in November 2009 and two temporary heaters each to 41 households in December 2009 due to heating systems breakdowns.

Gas and Electricity Disconnections

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive tenants have had their (i) gas; and (ii) electricity supplies disconnected because of unpaid bills in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3677/10)

Minister for Social Development: The provision of utility services with respect to a Housing Executive dwelling is a matter between the tenant and the utility provider. Consequently the Housing Executive does not hold records regarding the number of its tenants who have had gas or electrical supplies disconnected because of non payment of bills.

Social Housing Schemes

Rt Hon J Donaldson asked the Minister for Social Development for an indication of the time-scale for the completion of the new social housing units on the site at Ballymacross Hill in Lisburn; and to outline any other planned social housing schemes in the Lagan Valley constituency. (AQW 3678/10)

Minister for Social Development: Ulidia Housing Association are currently finalising their scheme submission in respect of a proposed development of up to 150 new homes at Ballymacoss Hill in Lisburn.

This scheme is expected to be formally submitted to the Housing Executive for approval in the coming weeks and subject to that approval process, I am confident that work can begin as soon as possible thereafter.

A timetable for completion of the work will obviously be dependant on receiving the various approvals necessary and the Housing Association procuring this work in accordance with European Regulations. I will be happy to update the Member on a more specific timetable once this is in place.

In respect of the wider provision for Lagan Valley, in addition to plans at Ballymacoss, the current Social Housing Development Programme has a further 10 schemes that could potentially deliver another 205 new homes in the Constituency. 112 of these have of course already been provided at Pond Park in former Military Housing. Any of these further schemes that do not get on site in this financial year for whatever reason can be rolled forward into next years programme that is still being finalised.

Deafblind People in Northern Ireland

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development (i) whether any agency of her Department collates data on the number of deafblind people in Northern Ireland; and (ii) to detail that information. (AQW 3693/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Department does not hold data on the number of deafblind people in Northern Ireland.

Details of the number of people who are claiming IB and DLA where their main disabling condition is Deafness or Blindness are set out in the tables below.

TABLE 1: DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE WITH MAIN DISABLING CONDITION AS 'BLINDNESS' AND 'DEAFNESS'

	Live load	Payload
Blindness	2,739	2,726
Deafness	2,769	2,761

TABLE 2: INCAPACITY BENEFIT WITH MAIN DISABLING CONDITION AS 'BLINDNESS' AND 'DEAFNESS'

	Live load	Payload
Blindness (and low vision)	266	152
Deafness	151	89

Social Fund

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the total amount of money awarded from the social fund for (i) crisis loans; and (ii) budgeting loans, in each of the past 5 years. (AQW 3694/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the Table below:

Year	Crisis Loan Awards £	Budgeting Loan Awards £
2008/09	12,321,510	43,786,809
2007/08	8,658,648	44,902,927
2006/07	9,090,753	51,839,449
2005/06	8,193,856	39,900,374
2004/05	8,443,771	36,929,712

Social Fund

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the sum total of monies awarded from the social fund for (i) crisis loans; and (ii) budgeting loans, which have been written off as unrecoverable in each of the past 5 years. (AQW 3695/10)

Minister for Social Development: The table below details the amount of Social Fund Crisis Loans and Budgeting Loans that have been written off as unrecoverable in each of the past five years.

Year	Budget Loan	Crisis Loan
2004-05	£113,448	£38,121
2005-06	£174,406	£63,465
2006-07	£114,326	£53,322
2007-08	£104,483	£34,215
2008-09	£130,539	£50,090

NI Housing Executive Land

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Social Development what land available for development in the East Belfast parliamentary constituency is currently held by the NI Housing Executive; and to outline the proposals the NIHE has for each land holding. (AQW 3702/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested. The Housing Executive has undeveloped land in its East Belfast and Castlereagh District Offices areas as detailed in the table below:

Housing Executive District Office	Location	Site Area (Hectares)	Land Available for Development *	Retained for future development **
East Belfast	Knocknagoney	5.76		Y
Castlereagh	Milltown Rd, Belvoir	1.20		Y
Castlereagh	Killynure Estate, Carryduff	1.75	Y	
Castlereagh	Keel Way, Moneyreagh	0.75		Y
Castlereagh	Coleshill Gdns, Belvoir	0.17		Y
Castlereagh	Grays Park, Belvoir	0.06		Y
Castlereagh	97-107 Gilnahirk Road	0.21		Y
Castlereagh	21 Grahamsbridge Road	0.06	Y	
Castlereagh	Millmount Retained Land	6.23	Y	
Castlereagh	Lower Braniel Road	0.50		Y

* These sites are programmed for transfer to Housing Associations for provision of social housing.

** Land retained for future development would include lands such as green/communal areas but which could potentially be considered for use at some stage in the future should a need be identified.

Housing Association Land: East Belfast Constituency

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Social Development what land in the East Belfast parliamentary constituency does each housing association currently have. (AQW 3703/10)

Minister for Social Development: Details of undeveloped land owned by Housing Associations in the East Belfast parliamentary constituency is as follows:

Housing Association	Location
Connswater Homes	Ballygowan Road
Helm Housing Association	Off Ravenhill Street (currently landscaped)
North & West Housing Association	Former factory site: Ravenhill Road/Ampere Street/Federation Street, Belfast
Oaklee Housing Association	Site at Hosford House
Open Door Housing Association	Former Hostel site, Castlereagh Street
Triangle Housing Association	104 Holywood Road, Belfast

Housing Associations: East Belfast Constituency

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Social Development (i) which housing associations registered by her Department (a) currently operate in the East Belfast parliamentary constituency; and (b) plan to do so in 2010/11 or 2011/12; and (ii) to outline the programmes planned by these housing associations for the next two financial years. (AQW 3704/10)

Minister for Social Development: The following Registered Housing Associations currently operate in the East Belfast parliamentary constituency and plan to continue to do so in 2010/11 and 2011/12.

Alpha Housing Association
 Ballynafeigh Housing Association
 Belfast Community Housing Association
 Clanmil Housing Association
 Connswater Homes
 Fold Housing Association
 Habinteg Housing Association
 Helm Housing Association
 Hearth Housing Association
 Oaklee Housing Association
 Open Door Housing Association
 SHAC Housing Association
 St Mathews Housing Association
 Triangle Housing Association
 Trinity Housing Association
 Ulidia Housing Association
 Wesley Housing Association

The Housing Executive, which manages the delivery of the Social Housing Development Programme by Registered Housing Associations, is unable to confirm details of programmes of activity beyond the current financial year as funding for 2010/11 and beyond has not yet been announced.

Sickness Benefits

Mr C Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development what procedures are in place to alert people on long-term sickness benefits that they need to renew their claims. (AQW 3731/10)

Minister for Social Development: Customers who receive Incapacity Benefit are not required to renew their claims. However, unless they fall into one of a limited number of exempt categories, all Incapacity Benefit

customers are required to periodically satisfy a test of incapacity - a process which is initiated by the Agency and may include a medical assessment.

There is no requirement for customers who receive Employment and Support Allowance to renew their claims. All Employment and Support Allowance customers are subject to a review of their medical condition between three months and three years after they have passed a Work Capability Assessment and they are notified of this in writing.

Cold Weather Payments

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development which Department drew up the eligibility for individuals to receive cold weather payments; what input her Department had in the process. (AQW 3732/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Cold Weather Payment Scheme, was designed by the Department of Social Security in Britain and came into operation on 7 November 1988. That Department remained responsible for all subsequent amendments to the scheme until the establishment of the Department for Work and Pensions. All amendments to the scheme since November 2003 have been put in place in Britain by the Department for Work and Pensions.

In keeping with the long standing principle of parity in social security matters, the then Department of Health and Social Services for Northern Ireland made the necessary legislation to set up the equivalent Cold Weather Payment Scheme for Northern Ireland also on 7 November 1988.

The parity principle operates on the basis that Northern Ireland has the same range of benefits which are paid at the same rates and subject to the same conditions as in Britain.

As is the normal practice there was and continues to be close liaison on all social security matters between my Department and the responsible Department in Britain.

Nelson Street Site in North Belfast

Ms C Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to outline any contact her Department has had with developers or agencies/representatives of developers in relation to the Nelson Street site in north Belfast. (AQW 3777/10)

Minister for Social Development: I am not aware of any meetings having taken place between my officials or the Housing Executive and developers or agencies/representatives of developers specifically in relation to the Nelson Street site.

Donegall Gardens Area of South Belfast

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development what action she intends to take to provide new extensions to Housing Executive properties in the Donegall Gardens area of south Belfast. (AQW 3873/10)

Minister for Social Development: There are currently no plans to provide new extensions to Housing Executive dwellings in Donegall Gardens.

Pensioners Bungalows in the Bloomfield Estate

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on when the refurbishment of the pensioners bungalows in the Bloomfield Estate, Bangor is due to start. (AQW 3898/10)

Minister for Social Development: Improvement works to the one bedroom bungalows in the Bloomfield Estate were programmed in three phases. Phase 2 of the proposed improvement works includes the 44 dwellings at Ballyree Drive and the work is now programmed to start in September 2010. This is, however, dependent on the availability of funding.

Social Fund

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (1) the total number of applications made to the social fund for (a) crisis loans; and (b) budgeting loans in the past six months, for money to pay (i) electricity bills (ii) gas bills (iii) home heating oil bills; (2) the number of these applications which were successful; and (3) the total of monies awarded in loans to successful applicants. (AQW 3913/10)

Minister for Social Development: This information is not recorded in the format requested. The overall number of applications received, awards made and associated expenditure is set out in the table below and covers the 6 month period from 1 July 2009 to 31 December 2009.

	Number of Applications Received	Number of awards made	Total amount awarded (£)
Crisis Loans	75,478	56,578	6,954,429
Budgeting Loans	84,128	68,378	31,493,993

Urban Regeneration and Community Development

Ms C Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development if her Department has a strategy or policy framework for urban regeneration and community development; and if so, how she intends to involve the community and voluntary sector in the implementation of this policy or strategy. (AQW 4020/10)

Minister for Social Development: A Project Team has been established to take forward the development of a strategy and policy framework for urban regeneration and community development in Northern Ireland. It is intended that the framework will be ready for May 2011. It is also intended that any stakeholders central to the delivery of any new policies or strategies that may evolve during the course of this work, will be fully consulted during the production process.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 29 January 2010

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages

Mr D Bradley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what actions they plan to take to comply with the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. (AQW 2688/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): Our Department currently complies with the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages by applying the agreed Guidance on meeting the UK Government commitments in respect of Irish and Ulster Scots. This Guidance provides the framework for enabling our Department to comply with the principles of the Charter.

Contained within the Guidance are Codes of Courtesy for Irish and Ulster Scots; these provide specific advice on dealing with issues such as personal names, face to face interviews and meetings, telephone calls, correspondence and addresses.

Our Department has translated a number of documents into Irish and plans to continue to comply with the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages.

Anti-Bullying Publications

Mr A Ross asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) what anti-bullying publications their Department has funded and distributed to schools; and (ii) what feedback their Department has received. (AQW 3834/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Children and Young People's Unit produced and distributed an anti-bullying eight page comic called "Big Bully" to children in primary schools here in support of Anti-Bullying week (16-20 November). The comic was aimed at providing children with information in an interesting format on how to deal with bullying behaviour.

Since the comic was distributed, the Children and Young People's Unit has received numerous requests for extra copies from head teachers who were very happy with the publication and feedback from several parents who welcomed the information.

The Department also received feedback from two head teachers who stated that the block capitals used in the comic were not suitable for Key Stage 1 children and that the panel depicting the parents with the head teacher could encourage antagonistic exchanges. Their comments have been noted for future reference when producing material for this age group.

Capital Assets Realisation Taskforce

Mrs N Long asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) for an update on the work of the Capital Assets Realisation Taskforce; (ii) how targets and plans are being adjusted in light of the changing property

markets; and (iii) how assets will be prioritised and progressed for realisation during the current Assembly term. (AQW 3857/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The downturn in the land and property market has meant that it has not been appropriate to pursue disposals of development sites during 2008 and 2009. No sales took place during 2008-09 and it is unlikely that any sales proceeds will now be realised during 2009-10. The position for 2010-11 is being kept under review.

The policy remains that public bodies should dispose of surplus assets, but any prospective asset realisations are subject to appraisal under DFP's "Green Book" Guidance on appraisal and evaluation to ensure value for money before a decision to proceed with disposal or other form of realisation is taken.

A Capital Assets Realisation Team (CART) led by the Strategic Investment Board continues to monitor the current market and to work with departments on options to realise value from surplus or under-utilised assets. It is in this context that CART has been working with departments on a number of potential development opportunities, including Grosvenor Road, Colintown Town Centre and East Belfast Development Project. This work is ongoing.

In view of the current difficulties with the land and property markets, the First Minister and deputy First Minister asked thed Vernon to review the original recommendations of the Capital Realisations Taskforce, and his report is now under consideration.

Disabled Access at Portadown Railway Station

Mr S Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action they are taking under their equality and disability remit, to make NI Railways/Translink provide proper disabled access in Portadown Railway Station, which is the access point for more than 400,000 rail passenger journeys per year. (AQW 3890/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA), places a duty on service providers to make reasonable adjustments to the physical features of a building which make accessing a service impossible or unreasonably difficult for disabled people. This includes providing disabled access in railway stations.

Part 3 of the DDA gives disabled people a "right of access" to goods, services and facilities. OFMDFM recently made the Disability Discrimination (Transport Vehicles) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 lifting the exemption which applied to transport providers from Part 3 of the DDA. This means that from 25 January 2010 transport providers must not discriminate against disabled people when providing goods, facilities and services.

Responsibility for transport issues falls to the Department for Regional Development. The Minister for Regional Development has advised that Portadown Railway Station will be upgraded but, owing to pressures on available capital budgets, the work may not be completed until 2014. The Minister further advises that in his answer to question AQW 3149/10, he highlighted the work in place to overcome the current shortcomings. The Minister for Regional Development has still to agree capital plans with Translink for the next few years. It is expected this will be completed, in the context of budgets available, within the next few months.

Disability Discrimination Acts

Mr S Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail any action they have taken under Disability Discrimination Acts in the past three years. (AQW 3891/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: In the past three years the following legislation has been introduced using powers within the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (as amended by the Disability Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 2006).

- The Disability Discrimination (Premises) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007;
- the Disability Discrimination (Service Providers and Public Authorities Carrying Out Functions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007;
- the Disability Discrimination (Questions and Replies Order (Northern Ireland) 2007;
- the Disability Discrimination (Private Clubs, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008;
- the Disability Discrimination (Guidance on the Definition of Disability)(Appointed Day) Order (NI) 2008;

- the Disability Discrimination (Transport Vehicles) Regulations (NI) 2009; and
- the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (Commencement No 10) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (as amended) requires public authorities, when carrying out their functions, to have due regard to the need to: promote positive attitudes towards disabled people and encourage the participation of disabled people in public life. Public Authorities are also under a duty to submit Disability Action Plans to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland explaining how they propose to fulfill these disability duties in relation to their functions.

OFMDFM published its first Disability Action Plan in July 2008 and this was revised in April 2009. The Plan is available on the OFMDFM website at:

http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/dap_-_revised_version_2009.pdf.

One of the key indicators for OFMDFM in the plan is to remove barriers to participation and achieve a measurable improvement in specified aspects of the lives of people with disabilities by 2012. On 3 December 2009 we received the Report of the Promoting Social Inclusion Working Group on Disability. The Working Group was chaired by a Senior Civil Servant and made up of representatives from the voluntary and community sector and government departments. Publication of the report marks a culmination of the significant work of the Group and various subgroups. The Executive will now be asked to respond to the report and we anticipate a public consultation on how Government plans to take the work forward.

Disability Discrimination

Mr S Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the extent of their enforcement powers in matters relating to disability discrimination. (AQW 3892/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Enforcement of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 is a matter for the courts or industrial tribunals. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland has responsibility for keeping under review the working of the Act. The Commission also have specific powers under the Act to keep under review the “disability duties” placed on public authorities.

The legislation does not provide us with the power to enforce disability legislation.

Equality Legislation

Mr S Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the extent of their enforcement powers relating to equality legislation. (AQW 3893/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 came into force in January 2000 and placed a statutory obligation on all designated public authorities to ensure that they carry out their various functions relating to Northern Ireland having due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between nine social categories:

- 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.

Without prejudice to its obligations under subsection (1), a designated public authority must have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

Under Schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) has a statutory responsibility for keeping the effectiveness of Section 75 under review.

The legislation does not provide us with the power to enforce equality legislation.

OFMDFM’s Equality Scheme states that the department “is fully committed to the fulfilment of the obligations on the promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations required under Section 75 and Schedule 9 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998”. Our equality scheme sets out how OFMDFM proposes to fulfil those obligations.

We have a responsibility to oversee the implementation of these equality obligations throughout the devolved administration, and we have a particular interest in ensuring that our department shows leadership and sets the best possible example for other public authorities. Accordingly, we maintain close oversight of the commitments contained in our Equality Scheme.

The Equality Directorate in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister provides advice, support and challenge to other civil service departments in relation to their Section 75 duties.

Disability and Equality Staff

Mr S Gardiner asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) how many staff are employed in the sections of their Department which deal with disability and equality; and (ii) what the total salary costs of these staff have been in each of the past three years. (AQW 3894/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Equality, Rights and Social Need Division covers a wide range of policy and legislative areas relating to equality and disability. Staff in post is currently 39. Within this overall total, one member of staff has lead responsibility for legislative disability issues and a second works exclusively on disability legislation.

Separately, a member of staff in the Central Anti Poverty Unit deals with policy matters surrounding disability.

The total divisional salary costs for each of the past three years is:

2009/10	£1.7 million
2008/09	£1.8 million
2007/08	£1.5 million

Review of Public Administration

Mr D McClarty asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) for an update on the Department's implementation of the Review of Public Administration; (ii) if it is on target to meet the March 2011 RPA saving targets; and (iii) how staffing levels have been reduced as a result of RPA. (AQW 4108/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: As a result of the Review of Public Administration reforms (i) there are no implementation decisions impacting OFMDFM (ii) no savings targets to be met; and (iii) no staffing levels to be reduced.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Livestock Losses

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) how many farm animals perished during the recent floods in Fermanagh; (ii) what compensation is available to farmers in respect of these livestock losses; and (iii) how much compensation has been paid to date. (AQW 3759/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew): Following communication with local officials and rendering plants in Fermanagh, there is no evidence to suggest any animals were affected adversely during the recent floods.

There are currently no financial support measures available for farmer's losses due to the severe weather. I will however make representation to Executive colleagues, and if there is agreement I will direct officials to make an assessment of the damage incurred.

Livestock Losses

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) how many farm animals perished during the recent cold weather; (ii) what compensation is available to farmers in respect of these livestock losses; and (iii) how much compensation has been paid to date. (AQW 3760/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Following communication with local officials and rendering plants in Fermanagh, there is no evidence to suggest any farm animals were affected adversely during the recent cold weather.

There are currently no financial support measures available for farmer's losses due to the severe weather.

Financial Assistance to Fish Farms

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) to detail the financial assistance her Department has given to fish farms in each of the last five years; (ii) the reasons for the awarding of the financial assistance; and (iii) which fish farms have received assistance. (AQW 3762/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The information requested is provided in the table below:-

Year	Name of Business	Assistance Provided	Reason for assistance
2005	Silverstream Trout Fisheries	£11,637.56	Improved fish welfare and water quality
2006	Silverstream Trout Fisheries	£23,385.66	Modernisation of Trout Production Unit
2007	Northern Salmon Co. Ltd	£223,570.80	Expansion of Facilities
2008	Blue Valley Fish Farm	£43,201.23	Modernisation of Fish Production
2008	Glen Oak	£58,600.00	Efficiency through Technology
2008	Northern Salmon Co. Ltd	£32,036.70	Predator Prevention and Site Security Measures

Single Farm Payments

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she can confirm that she challenged the findings of a Single Farm Payment panel that found in favour of two appellants from south Down, and that she further challenged the finding of a Court that also found in their favour; and for her assessment of the impact on these farmers of being denied their Single Farm Payments. (AQW 3790/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I can confirm that two farmers from South Down asked for a review of my Department's decision not to allow them to add land to their Single Farm Payment (SFP) application after the time allowed for this had expired. They relied on the "obvious error" provision of the EU Regulations. In one case the External Panel recommended that the Department's decision should be changed. In the other case the External Panel recommended that the Department's decision should not be changed. In both cases, I considered all options within the EU rules and decided that the Department's original decision in each case should stand.

The farmers applied for a Judicial Review of these decisions. The Court directed that the cases be referred back to the External Panel for further consideration and provided guidance about the way in which cases of "obvious error" should be considered.

The Department applied to have the Court's decision reviewed by the Court of Appeal, which allowed the Department's appeals, set aside the orders made in the lower court and said "there being no obvious error the Minister applied the proper test".

No SFP has been denied to these farmers. They received all the SFP entitlements they applied for in 2005. As confirmed by the Court of Appeal, there is no provision in the EU rules that would allow me to increase their SFP entitlements.

Fishing Organisations

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has had any discussions with fishing organisations to ascertain how she can help them maintain their livelihood in light of the 9% drop in quotas. (AQW 3791/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I expect to receive a report from the Fisheries Forum by the end of March which will make recommendations generally on the future strategic direction for the fishing industry and specifically on the EFF investment that it thinks should be made. Axis 1 of the EFF provides for adaptation of the fleet and the Forum will, no doubt take account of recent changes in fishing opportunities and anticipated future prospects. When I have had the opportunity to consider those recommendations I will engage directly with the Forum, before reaching a final decision.

European Fisheries Fund

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the amount of funding allocated by the Scottish Parliament to assist fishing communities, to explain why her Department has not allocated European Fisheries Fund monies. (AQW 3792/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There has been a delay in getting the EFF started in the north of Ireland as a result of having to complete Measure Level business cases on my Department's investment proposals. Four key measures are now open and two further measures for "vessel modernisation" and the "small scale and coastal sector" will open early in 2010. I will consider the case for further measures within Axis 1 once I have the report of the Fisheries Forum and provided a robust business justification can be established.

To date, we have received 28 applications seeking approximately £3.5 million of EFF grants. Two selection panels were convened before Christmas to consider the applications that have been received to date. My officials have issued letters of offer to 12 successful projects, which represents an investment of £1.1 million. There will be further meetings of the EFF assessment panel in February to appraise the remaining applications.

Fishermen

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to enable fishermen to seek and gain quotas for lease. (AQW 3793/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Quota leasing is a commercial matter and my Department does not get involved in the arrangements that are made between fishing businesses.

Fishing Fleets

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she is aware of the quota cuts made by Brussels for the Spanish, French and German fishing fleets; and how this compares to the quota cuts here. (AQW 3798/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have not carried out any comparison of this nature. The Commission will make its proposals for particular stocks based on its interpretation of the scientific advice. In the case of Area VII nephrops stocks the Commission was clearly influenced by the ICES advice on harvest ratios. Since the Commission has some doubts about this, our resources are best spent on carrying out further scientific work to establish a harvest ratio, that everyone will agree represents an appropriate level of fishing consistent with a management objective of maximising the sustainable yield of nephrops.

I will be considering with AFBI, the industry and colleagues in the south of Ireland how best to take this important work forward.

Potato Crops

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the damage to potato crops as a result of the previous heavy rainfall that prevented harvesting of crops and the recent frost; the financial impact this will have on potato growers; and what level of compensation or financial assistance her Department will provide to potato growers who have lost crops. (AQW 4057/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am aware that the heavy rainfall and the more recent frost caused great difficulties to many potato growers and my heart goes out to all those affected.

There are currently no financial support measures available for potato growers and my Department is currently facing significant financial resource pressures across the board. Accordingly, in order not to raise expectation, my Department has not assessed loss at this time.

I do however intend to make representations to Executive colleagues, and if agreement can be reached and money found, I will direct officials to assess the damage and resulting financial loss from the bad weather.

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Hotels Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the number of nights in hotels booked for Civil Servants in his Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these hotel rooms, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3933/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr N McCausland): In the last five years one hotel room was booked but not used at a cost of £129.

Flights Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the number of flights booked for Civil Servants in his Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these flights, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3934/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In the last five years four flights were booked and not used. The total cost of £1015.67 is detailed as follows:

2005/06	£540.00
2006/07	£291.80
2009/10	£183.87

Coleraine Library

Mr B Leonard asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he can confirm that proposed cutbacks in his Department's 2010/11 budget will not affect or delay the building of Coleraine library. (AQW 3944/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department is currently considering an Economic Appraisal for improved library facilities in Coleraine.

Libraries NI are working towards a potential partnership with Coleraine Borough Council on the Market Yard site. This multi purpose development includes a museum, tourist information facilities, a café, outdoor event space and a new library located within the listed walls of the former Coleraine market.

No major expenditure is planned on this project for 2010/11 and I can therefore confirm that the draft funding allocation to Libraries NI for 2010/11 will not affect or delay the project.

Coleraine Library

Mr B Leonard asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether the collection known as ‘the Irish Room’ will be fully re-integrated into the new Coleraine Library. (AQW 3945/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The proposal for the new Coleraine Library forms part of Libraries NI’s projected capital programme and my Department is currently considering the Economic Appraisal for this project.

The preferred option in this appraisal includes accommodation for ‘The Irish Room’ collection.

Mountain Biking

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what he is doing to promote mountain biking. (AQW 4001/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for the promotion of mountain biking rests, in the first instance with the governing body for the sport, Cycling Ulster. Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), however, which is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland has, over the last three financial years, provided £202,507 to Cycling Ulster towards the development of all cycling disciplines, including mountain biking. In that time, it has also provided almost £50,000, through its Athlete Support Programme, to assist a number of talented mountain bikers develop their full potential. Furthermore, SNI has funded a part-time Development Officer to work closely with local cycling clubs, including mountain biking, to help them improve and develop their sport. It has also provided advice to the Forestry Service on how to improve mountain biking provision in the Mourne Mountains and part funds the Countryside Activity Access Network (CAAN) which is currently considering options to develop world class mountain biking facilities in Northern Ireland.

The Arts

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much each council spent on the arts in each of the last three years; and what this represents in terms of spend per person in those council areas. (AQW 4047/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure does not hold figures in relation to district council arts expenditure over the last three years. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland uses data collected by the Department of the Environment to produce details of arts expenditure for each council area. The most up to date data compiled by the Arts Council relates to district councils’ expenditure during the 2006 – 2007 financial year.

The attached table sets out the expenditure by each council in 2006/07 and how this equated to spend per person.

Council	Arts Funding	Spend Per Person*
Belfast	7,738,643	£28.94
Cookstown	842,255	£24.22
Armagh	1,327,301	£23.37
Lisburn	1,872,920	£16.58
Strabane	574,613	£14.68
Fermanagh	704,123	£11.62
Coleraine	506,961	£8.94
Newry and Mourne	775,195	£8.30
Antrim	420,755	£8.17
Moyle	131,833	£7.97
Newtownabbey	631,283	£7.77
Ballymoney	233,631	£7.65

Council	Arts Funding	Spend Per Person*
Down	520,836	£7.62
Omagh	344,121	£6.74
Craigavon	577,924	£6.66
Derry	629,725	£5.84
North Down	281,839	£3.58
Dungannon and South Tyrone	183,179	£3.50
Ards	266,040	£3.49
Ballymena	210,793	£3.44
Banbridge	153,553	£3.38
Limavady	72,319	£2.11
Carrickfergus	72,263	£1.82
Larne	49,519	£1.58
Castlereagh	70,859	£1.08
Magherafelt	15,668	£0.37

*Spend per person based on total expenditure for each council on arts development/support and theatres and public engagement. Population figures used were NISRA's 2006 mid year estimates.

Libraries NI

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure why Libraries NI currently rents two offices in Lisburn with annual running costs of £80,000, when it owns a building in Ballynahinch that is better equipped to deliver services. (AQW 4092/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Libraries NI's offices in Lisburn were rented to temporarily house the project teams tasked with the setting up of the organisation's corporate services functions. Libraries NI is now operational and is in the process of deciding where these corporate functions should be located on a permanent basis.

The offices in Lisburn were never intended to be a permanent home for Libraries NI and their short term leases reflect this.

Libraries NI are currently preparing an Economic Appraisal which considers the options for their headquarters functions. This appraisal should be presented to the Libraries NI Board in February or March 2010 and will consider the option of using vacant space in a number of library buildings (including the former SEELB Library HQ at Ballynahinch).

The process for deciding on the new headquarters location will take account of the Bain Review's recommendations on the location of Public Sector Jobs.

Libraries NI

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure why Libraries NI is carrying out a public consultation six weeks after a decision was taken to close its headquarters in Ballynahinch; and if a full equality impact assessment has been carried out. (AQW 4093/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Board of Libraries NI have identified the potential for efficiency savings through the rationalisation of the number of its Regional Administrative Centres from 5 to 4.

No final decision has been taken by the Board and the proposal to close Ballynahinch as a Regional Administrative Centre is currently out to public consultation.

The public consultation will include full consideration of any Equality impacts arising from the proposed decision.

I would encourage everyone with an interest in the future of Ballynahinch library HQ to contribute to this important consultation process.

Libraries NI

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of the decision by NI Libraries to remove services from Ballynahinch prior to identifying a location for its new headquarters; and if a short-list of potential locations for the new headquarters has been agreed. (AQW 4094/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Libraries NI proposal to stop using the former SEELB Library HQ at Ballynahinch as a Regional Administrative Centre is a separate exercise from the identification of a future location for Libraries NI's corporate (headquarters) functions.

An Economic Appraisal which considers the options for locating Library NI's corporate functions is being prepared and this should be presented to the Libraries NI Board in February or March 2010. As such the process of identifying and short-listing potential locations is ongoing.

Ballynahinch former library HQ is being considered as a location for Libraries NI's corporate services functions in this Appraisal, along with other underutilised library accommodation and other options (such as renting or buying a new headquarters). Ballynahinch will not be closed until a decision regarding the location for Libraries NI's corporate functions has been agreed.

No final decision has been taken by the Libraries NI Board on the location for its corporate functions.

Review of Public Administration

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) for an update on his Department's implementation of the Review of Public Administration; (ii) if he is on target to meet the March 2011 RPA saving targets; and (iii) how staffing levels have been reduced as a result of RPA. (AQW 4106/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department has successfully delivered its commitments to establish Libraries NI from 1 April 2009 and to transfer the functions of the Fisheries Conservancy into the Department from 1 June 2009. The remainder of the Department's commitments are largely on target to be achieved by May 2011. The Department is currently developing a Museums Policy for Northern Ireland that includes reviewing how best the functions of the Northern Ireland Museums Council can be achieved by March 2011.

The Department had RPA Savings targets of £600k in 09/10 and £1,200k in 10/11. These are on target to be achieved.

The establishment of Libraries NI has already delivered a reduction of 13 senior staff. Libraries NI plans to achieve a further reduction of around 25 staff in 2010, mainly in middle management grades.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Schools: Burst Pipe Incidents

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Education to detail, since the start of December 2009, (i) the number of burst pipes which have occurred in (a) schools; and (b) other buildings owned by her Department; (ii) the number of such incidents where serious damage was caused to property; (iii) the nature and extent of the damage in each incident; and (iv) the estimated total cost of repairs associated with all burst pipe incidents. (AQW 3799/10)

Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane): Tá freagracht ar na boird oideachais agus leabharlainne, a sholáthar an t-eolas don fhreagra seo, as cothabháil agus cóiriú na scoileanna agus na bhfoirgneamh eile sna hearnálacha oideachais rialaithe agus faoi chothabháil.

The maintenance and repair of schools and other buildings in the maintained and controlled education sectors is the responsibility of the education and library boards who have provided the information in this answer.

- (i) (a) 279 schools have been affected by burst pipes;
- (b) 34 other buildings have been affected by burst pipes;
- (ii) In 18 incidents serious damage has been caused to property;
- (iii) The nature and extent is typified by damage caused to ceilings, light fittings, floor coverings, walls, kitchen repairs, burst underground pipes and frozen heating circuits causing radiators to split.
- (iv) The estimated total cost of repairs is £247,500.

Education and Skills Authority

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Education what discussions she has had with her Ministerial colleagues since December 2009 about the Education and Skills Authority. (AQW 3884/10)

Minister of Education: Is eol go forleathan, áfach, go bhfuil na saincheisteanna a éiríonn as leasuithe a bhí leagtha amach ag Oifig na mBillí faoi réir comhfhreagrais ó chomhghleacaithe an Choiste Fheidhmiúcháin. D'iarr mé go sceidealófar na saincheisteanna seo chun plé a dhéanamh orthu ag tábla an Choiste Fheidhmiúcháin chomh luath agus is féidir.

It is widely known that the issues arising from amendments that have been laid in the Bill Office are the subject of correspondence with Executive colleagues. I have asked for these issues to be scheduled for discussion around the Executive table at the earliest opportunity.

You will also be aware that many of these issues have been discussed publicly for over a year since the Bill moved to the Committee for Education in December 2008. Their resolution ultimately rests with the Executive Committee. My officials and I have worked diligently with the Committee, with a wider range of stakeholders including Ministerial colleagues throughout this time to secure agreement to all the issues which attend to implementing the Executive's agreed policy on implementing the RPA proposals.

Regrettably, the delay in progressing the Bill means that the benefits of establishing a unitary authority, generating millions of pounds of annual savings and improving the service available to pupils will not be realised as quickly as we had hoped. I trust the Member will support me in calling for early progress on these matters and the rapid enactment of the Bill.

Inappropriate Relationships between Teachers and Pupils

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Education the number of inappropriate relationships (i) sexual; and (ii) other between teachers and school pupils recorded in each of the last five years, broken down by gender of teacher. (AQW 3935/10)

Minister of Education: The protection of children and young people is of paramount importance and schools have a very particular and significant role to play in this safeguarding task.

Ní choinníonn mo Roinn an t-eolas a iarradh. Ní mór déileáil le gach líomhain, áfach, maidir le gaolmhaireacht neamhoiriúnach idir foireann scoile agus daltaí i gcomhréir le treoir reatha, mar bheart araíonachta nó mar tharchur chuig na gníomhaíochtaí imscrúdaithe, más iad sin seirbhísí sóisialta nó na péas.

My Department does not hold the requested information. However, all allegations of inappropriate relationships between schools' staff and pupils must be dealt with in line with current guidance, as a disciplinary matter or as a referral to the investigating agencies, either social services or the police.

Records of allegations made about schools' staff and the action taken are held at school level. Where the allegation of an inappropriate relationship is made against a member of staff, in addition to the normal reporting arrangements at the time to the investigating agencies, a separate record must also be kept of all allegations made and the action taken and presented to the Board of Governors for scrutiny once per year. The Department does not collect information from individual schools about any allegations of child abuse.

Area Based Planning

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Education how much has been spent to date on Area Based Planning in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 3980/10)

Minister of Education: To date spending on area-based planning has been limited to the exercise taken forward by Adeline Dinsmore and colleagues to explore the efficient and effective delivery of the Entitlement Framework on an area basis and which resulted in the publication of the “Together Towards Entitlement” Report. Total cost of the exercise, which took place between March 2008 and November 2009, including publication of the report and dissemination of the findings was £136,000. This was a central initiative and costs were not incurred on an education and library board basis.

Faoi Athbhreithniú ar Riarachán Poiblí, beidh pleanáil cheantar-bhunaithe faoi chúram an Údaráis um Oideachas agus Scileanna. Tá an dréachtreachtaíocht i dtaca leis an ghné seo faoi réir mionscrúdaithe réamhreachtaigh ón Choiste Oideachais.

Under the Review of Public Administration, area-based planning will become the operational responsibility of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA). The draft legislation relating to this aspect is currently the subject of pre-legislative scrutiny by the Committee for Education.

Spending on area-based planning in future years will be dependent on its roll out following the establishment of the ESA and will be contained within planning budgets for that organisation.

Area Based Planning

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Education how much her Department has set aside for Area Based Planning in the next three years. (AQW 3981/10)

Minister of Education: To date spending on area-based planning has been limited to the exercise taken forward by Adeline Dinsmore and colleagues to explore the efficient and effective delivery of the Entitlement Framework on an area basis and which resulted in the publication of the “Together Towards Entitlement” Report. Total cost of the exercise, which took place between March 2008 and November 2009, including publication of the report and dissemination of the findings was £136,000. This was a central initiative and costs were not incurred on an education and library board basis.

Faoi Athbhreithniú ar Riarachán Poiblí, beidh pleanáil cheantar-bhunaithe faoi chúram an Údaráis um Oideachas agus Scileanna. Tá an dréachtreachtaíocht i dtaca leis an ghné seo faoi réir mionscrúdaithe réamhreachtaigh ón Choiste Oideachais.

Under the Review of Public Administration, area-based planning will become the operational responsibility of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA). The draft legislation relating to this aspect is currently the subject of pre-legislative scrutiny by the Committee for Education.

Spending on area-based planning in future years will be dependent on its roll out following the establishment of the ESA and will be contained within planning budgets for that organisation.

Specialist Schools

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Education how much her Department has spent on specialist schools since they were introduced; and how much has been set aside for these schools in the next two years. (AQW 3983/10)

Minister of Education: Ó ainmníodh saincoileanna den chéad uair i mí Mheán Fómhair 2006, tá £12,690,700 leithdháilte ag mo Roinn. Meastar go mbeidh £5.55 milliún breise de dhíth go mí Lúnasa 2011 nuair a chríochnaíonn Clár na Saincoileanna.

Since Specialist Schools were first designated in September 2006, my Department has allocated a total of £12,690,700. It is estimated a further £5.55 million will be required until August 2011 when the current Specialist Schools programme comes to an end.

Transfer Tests

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of (i) design; (ii) administration; and (iii) marking of transfer tests set by the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment, in the three years prior to their abolition. (AQW 3988/10)

Minister of Education: Go dtí 2008/09, bhí an Scrúdú Aistrithe faoi riarachán an Chomhairle Churaclaim, Scrúduithe agus Measúnachta (CCSM) thar ceann na Roinne. Sholáthar CCSM na figiúirí thíos.

Until 2008/09, the Transfer Test was administered on behalf of the Department by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).

The figures below have been provided by CCEA.

TRANSFER TEST COSTS 2006/07 - 2008/09

	2008/09 £	2007/08 £	2006/07 £
Design	210,882	202,806	203,464
Question Paper Production	36,651	42,317	24,145
Distribution	30,000	30,000	30,000
Staff	46,730	43,064	41,772
	113,382	115,381	95,917
Marking	153,951	143,893	154,286
Total Costs	478,214	462,079	453,668

Primary and Secondary School Enrolment

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the most recent projected figures for primary and secondary enrolment until 2020; and (ii) when the research was last updated. (AQW 3989/10)

Minister of Education: Tá líon réamh-mheasta na bpaistí a bheidh ar aois éigeantach bhunscoile agus iar-bhunscoile go dtí 2010 liostaithe thíos. Glacadh na figiúirí

ó réamh-mheastacháin daonra na Gníomhaireachta Staidrimh agus Taighde a rinneadh sa bhliain 2008 agus a foilsíodh i mí Dheireadh Fómhair 2009.

Projected numbers of children of compulsory primary and post-primary school age until 2020 are listed below. The figures are taken from 2008-based NISRA population projections which were published in October 2009.

Year	Children Aged 4-9	Children Aged 11-15
2009	159590	123312
2010	159469	122396
2011	161219	120840
2012	164724	118593
2013	167993	115888
2014	171168	113902
2015	173514	112593
2016	175293	113380
2017	176731	114722
2018	177135	117093
2019	176351	120684

Year	Children Aged 4-9	Children Aged 11-15
2020	175791	123317

Source: NISRA population projections (2008 based).

Note:

1. Age is at 30 June each year and relates to the total projected persons of that age.
2. Children aged 4 - 10 taken as of compulsory primary school age, ie, in Year 1- 7.
3. Children aged 11 - 15 taken as of compulsory post-primary school age, ie, in Year 8 - 12.

The department also uses NISRA population projections to model projected numbers by school type up until 2015/16. The figures are published on the DE website

Postgraduate Certificate in Education

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to ensure that the Post Graduate Certificate in Education is recognised by the Teaching Council of Ireland. (AQW 4003/10)

Minister of Education: Le bheith in ann a theagasc i ndeisceart na hÉireann, ní mór do shealbhóirí cháilíocht múinteoireachta a chlárú le Comhairle Mhúinteoireachta na hÉireann agus an táille iomchuí a íoc ar dtús. Ní mór dóibh siúd a bhfuil cáilíocht acu nach bhfuil ar liosta faofa Chomhairle Mhúinteoireachta na hÉireann tústáille iarratais a íoc le go measfar a gcáilíocht le haghaidh aitheantais.

In order to teach in the south of Ireland, holders of a teaching qualification first need to register with the Teaching Council of Ireland (TCI) and pay an appropriate fee. Those holding a qualification which is not on the TCI's approved list must pay an additional initial application fee in order to have their qualification assessed for recognition.

It is a matter for individual institutions to apply to the TCI to have their degree and/or PGCE programmes recognised for registration purposes and added to the TCI's approved list. It is, however, for the TCI to determine whether a qualification meets the pedagogical and curricular requirements in the south or whether additional training is required.

I am aware that certain courses provided by the University of Ulster are already on the TCI's approved list of qualifications, and Queen's University Belfast have advised that they are currently exploring this issue with the TCI in relation to their PGCE programmes. In this context, I have asked my officials to write to all of the local Initial Teacher Education providers to request that they consider seeking formal recognition of their courses where appropriate. However, ultimately, this will be a decision for each providing institution in the north.

Interim Education and Library Boards

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Education what steps she has taken to appoint councillors to the interim Education and Library Boards. (AQW 4046/10)

Minister of Education: Tá na próisis le haghaidh roghnaithe agus ceapacháin faoi shiúl chun baill a cheapadh ar na Boird le linn na hidirthréimhse roimh bhunú an Údaráis um Oideachas agus Scileanna. Thug mé cuireadh do gach Comhairle ainmniúcháin chomhairleoirí a chur isteach a bheadh toilteanach a fhónamh ar na poist a raibh le fáil ina gceantair Bhoird faoi seach le linn na hidirthréimhse.

Selection and appointment processes are underway to appoint members to the Boards during the transitional period up to the establishment of ESA. I invited each Council to submit nominations of councillors who would be willing to serve during the transitional period for the posts available in their respective Board areas. In line with the Commissioner for Public Appointments guidance, there will be an eligibility sift of the application forms from Councillors and 'conversations with a purpose' will be held with eligible candidates to confirm and validate the suitability of candidates for the post. The decision on those who will be appointed will be made by me taking into account that each Board's membership is balanced in terms of diversity of skills and experience.

Until the transitional arrangements are fully in place, I have extended the terms of office of some existing members in each of the four Boards from 1 January from the Transferors, Trustees and the General Member (Teacher) categories of board member.

Decline in School Population

Mr J McCallister asked the Minister of Education to provide a comparison of the actual percentage decline in (i) the primary school; and (ii) secondary school population since 2004 against the percentage decline projected in the Costello Report, taking into account the rise in birth rates since 2000 and increased immigration. (AQW 4065/10)

Minister of Education: Déanann an tábla thíos comparáid idir athruithe céadatáin i ndaonra iar-bhunscoile, mar a tuaradh i dTuirisc Chostello 2004, ‘Socruithe Todhchaí Iar-bhunscoile i dtuaisceart na hÉireann’ agus figiúirí iarbhire.

The table below compares projected percentage changes in post primary school population, as projected in the 2004 Costello Report, ‘Future post-primary arrangements in the north of Ireland’, with actual figures

Percentage change in post-primary school enrolments from 2002/03 (actuals and 2002 based projections)

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Projected (2002based)	-1%	-2%	-4%	-5%	-7%	-7%	-8%
Actuals	0%	-1%	-3%	-4%	-5%	-5%	-5%

Source: School Census.

Note: excludes pupils in special units.

The Costello Report did not project primary school enrolments over the same period. The table below shows the percentage change in Year 1 – 7 enrolments in primary schools from 2002/03.

Percentage change in Year 1 - 7 enrolments in primary schools from 2002/03

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Percentage Change	-1%	-3%	-4%	-5%	-6%	-7%	-8%

Source: School Census.

Note: excludes pupils in special units.

Education Bill

Mr F Cobain asked the Minister of Education for an update on the progress of the Education Bill. (AQO 624/10)

Minister of Education: Ag tús mhí Dheireadh Fómhair 2009, iarradh ar an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin breithniú a dhéanamh ar an seasamh i dtaca le leasuithe a mhol an Coiste Oideachais, a mhol comhaltaí den Tionól agus a mhol mise, mar Aire. Go dtí seo, níor cuireadh an mhír sin ar scéideal gnó an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin le haghaidh a mbreithnithe.

The Executive was asked at the beginning of October 2009 to consider its position on amendments proposed by the Committee for Education, members of the Assembly and myself, as Minister. To date, that item has not been scheduled for Executive consideration. I will ask the Business Committee to schedule the Consideration Stage of the Bill as soon as the Executive’s position on amendments is decided.

Whilst I am disappointed at the delay in completing these important reforms, I remain committed to Raising Standards, increasing efficiency and inclosing the attainment gap between the best and the lowest performing schools.

Until the Bill is enacted I have put in place interim arrangements to safeguard the services and resources for which the existing bodies have responsibility.

I, nevertheless, remain concerned that the progress we need to make in delivering world class education to all our pupils is held up by the delay in enacting the legislation.

Schools: Capital Projects

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of Education what impact her review of all capital projects has had on schools' capital spending plans. (AQO 625/10)

Minister of Education: Go dtí seo, ní dheachaigh an t-athbhreithniú ar gach tionscadal caipitil i gcion ar dhul chun cinn phleananna caiteachais chaipitiúla. Tá an t-athbhreithniú leanúnach agus tá m'fheidhmeannaigh ag bailiú na fianaise ábhartha go léir.

To date, the review of all capital projects has not impacted on the progress of any capital spending plans. The review is ongoing and my officials are currently assembling all relevant evidence.

The review is designed to ensure that the reshaping of our schools estate and any subsequent investment plans are consistent with and supportive of the policy framework I have put in place to promote equality and target social disadvantage.

As Minister for Education, I need to ensure, particularly in the current economic climate, that the available resources are used to secure the best outcomes for children and maximum value for the taxpayer

I want to make sure that the right type of schools are in the right place and I believe review of all current capital projects will ensure that there is viable and sustainable provision which supports the delivery of high quality education for all young people.

Post-primary Education in East Antrim

Mr S Neeson asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to develop post-primary education facilities further in East Antrim. (AQO 626/10)

Minister of Education: Tá freagracht ar na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne agus Comhairle na Scoileanna Caitliceacha faoi Chothabháil as pleanáil eastáit na scoileanna faoi láthair ach beidh freagracht ar an Udarás um Oideachas agus Scileanna asti go luath faoi mo bheartais choinbhéirseachta.

The planning of the schools estate is currently the responsibility of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) in the first instance. Under my convergence plans it will shortly become the responsibility of the Education and Skills Authority in the first instance, with the Department of Education retaining ultimate responsibility for all planning and investment.

Proposed major capital works schemes for a number of post primary schools in the East Antrim area are at Economic Appraisal stage. These include Belfast High School, Carrickfergus Grammar and Carrickfergus College, Larne High School and the newly formed St Killian's College.

My Department and the Education and Skills Authority will assess all proposed major works projects in the context of the Sustainable Schools Policy and area based planning, as well as within the Department's wider policy framework ensuring the promotion of equality and targeting of social disadvantage.

Department of Education Budget

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Education if she can provide an assurance that the £73 million cut to her departmental budget, in addition to existing budgetary pressures, will not, as far as possible, impact on front-line services. (AQO 627/10)

Minister of Education: Tá mé ag breathnú faoi láthair ar roghanna le coigiltí breise atá riachtanach a sholáthar ón bhuiséad oideachais. Is substaintiúil atá scála na gcoigiltí breise atá le déanamh, agus beidh sé dúshlánach iad a sholáthar ar bhealach a íoslaghdaíonn an éifeacht ar sheirbhísí tosaigh -ach is é sin é a bheidh mé ag iarraidh a dhéanamh.

I am currently considering options for delivering the additional savings required from the education budget. The scale of the additional savings to be found is substantial and presents a significant challenge to deliver in a way that minimises the impact on front line services - but that is what I will be seeking to do. A key issue for me will be to ensure action is taken to reduce excessive bureaucracy. We had already been planning on the basis of securing some £13 million through the establishment of ESA and that funding is already out of the Education budget. The longer the establishment of ESA is delayed the longer it will take to deliver these savings and that

without question will impact on other areas. I have written to the Education Committee seeking their views on how savings can be achieved. In terms of equality my officials will carry out an equality assessment on each of the proposals and no decisions will be made until this process has been completed.

Glastry College, Newtownards

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Education if she is aware that Glastry College, Newtownards was over-subscribed by 57 pupils this year, and to explain why two meetings scheduled by her Department to discuss a new build for Glastry College have been cancelled. (AQO 628/10)

Minister of Education: The popularity of any school is most appropriately measured by the number of parents expressing a first preference on the Transfer Form for that school. Figures provided by the South Eastern Education and Library Board show that for admission to year 8 in September 2009, Glastry College received 107 first preference applications relative to an approved admissions number of 110 and so the College was not oversubscribed at first preference stage.

Maidir le ceist an fhoirgnimh nua do Glastry College is féidir liom a chur in iúl go bhfuil Comhairleoirí Teicniúla na Roinne Oideachais i dteagmháil le hoifigigh i mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt i dtaca le planáil na scoile nua agus bhuail siad leo ar roinnt ócáidí le míonna beaga anuas le plé a dhéanamh ar na ceistanna éagsúla planála.

On the issue of a new build for Glastry College I can advise you that the Department of Education's Technical Advisers have been liaising very closely with SEELB officials in respect of the planning of the new school and indeed have met with them on a number of occasions in recent months to discuss various planning issues. Further meetings were requested by the SEELB but in light of the need for the Economic Appraisal (EA) for Glastry College to be updated, it was considered that further meetings should be deferred until this work has been completed.

School Maintenance

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Education how much her Department has allocated for school maintenance in 2010/11. (AQO 629/10)

Minister of Education: Tá an buiséad don bhliain 2010-11 faoi bhreithniú faoi láthair agus ní dhearnadh aon chinneadh air go dtí seo.

The budget for 2010-11 is currently under consideration and no decisions have been taken at this point in time.

Grammar School Admissions

Mr R McCartney asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the continuing 'grade drift' in grammar school admissions. (AQO 630/10)

Minister of Education: Is é Aistriú 2010 beartas mo Roinne ar aistriú iar-bhunoideachais agus tá córas i bhfeidhm againn anois nach bhfuil áit don roghnú acadúil ann. Léiríonn an fhianaise ón scrúdú státurraithe deireanach go bhfuil mórán scoileanna gramadaí ag múineadh do dhaltaí a bhfuil réimse leathan ábaltachta acu.

Transfer 2010 is my Department's policy on post-primary transfer and we are putting in place a system that puts equality and equal opportunities for every child at the core.

Evidence from the final state-sponsored transfer test illustrates clearly that many grammar schools are already educating pupils of a broad range of ability.

Not one grammar school admitted exclusively A Grade pupils, and eight grammar schools had intakes where at least half of the pupils admitted obtained a Grade B2 or lower.

Despite a declining school population, grammar schools have continued to fill to their capacity, admitting pupils with lower transfer test grades who would previously have been admitted to secondary schools. In doing so, grammar schools have become less and less academically exclusive.

Only through the abandonment and rejection of academic selection can grammar schools provide true equality for prospective pupils.

For a full picture on the grade profile of grammar schools I would refer the Member to my reply to AQW 3385/10 published in the official report on 11 December 2009.

Early Years Strategy

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Education when the 0-6 Years strategy will be published. (AQO 631/10)

Minister of Education: Tá sé ar intinn ag mo Roinn Straitéis Luath-Bhlianta (0-6) a fhoilsiú le haghaidh comhairlithe go luath sa Gheimhreadh sa bhliain 2010.

My Department intends to publish the Early Years (0-6) Strategy for consultation in early Spring 2010.

Special Educational Needs: Expulsions

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Education how many children with special educational needs have been expelled in each of the last five years and what percentage this represented of the total children expelled. (AQO 632/10)

Minister of Education: The application of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice 5-stage approach to behaviour management was set out in 'Promoting and Sustaining Good Behaviour; A Discipline Strategy for Schools'. The strategy placed an emphasis on early intervention and on progressively more intensive support as necessary leading, where appropriate, to a Statement of special educational needs because of behavioural difficulties. The first 3 stages are based in the school, calling as necessary on external specialists; at Stages 4 and 5 the Board shares responsibility with schools. It is only at Stage 5 that a pupil has a Statement of special educational needs. In the 2008/09 school year, there were 60,520 pupils at Stages 1 – 5 of the Code of Practice, which represents 18.3% of the school population.

The decision to expel pupils, including those on the Code of Practice, must only be in response to very serious breaches of the school's discipline policy, and normally as a final step when all other alternative strategies have been tried and have failed.

Bailíonn mo Roinn staitisticí ar dhaltai a díbríodh ón scoil ó na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne gach bliain; ach tá an méid iomlán neamhsheasmhach agus níor chóir amharc air mar dheatháscaire d'iompar daltaí.

My Department collects expulsion statistics annually from the Education and Library Boards; however the overall total is volatile and should not be regarded as a good indicator of pupil behaviour. A single major incident in a school resulting in multiple expulsions could create the impression of a serious deterioration.

During the course of the last five years 223 pupils were expelled, of which 89 were at Stages 1-5 of the SEN Code of Practice. Figures in relation to the 2008/09 were published last week and, to put these in context, out of a population of just over 280,000 (actual 280,127), there were 36 expulsions. 22 of these pupils were on the SEN Code of Practice, which represents 0.008% of the relevant school population and 0.04% of the number of pupils on the SEN Code of Practice. In the previous four years, the number of pupils expelled were 25 (2007/08), 45 (2006/07), 54 (2005/06) and 63 (2004/05). Of these pupils, 11 (2007/08), 18 (2006/07), 16 (2005/06) and 22 (2004/05) respectively were on the SEN Code of Practice.

DEPARTMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Disciplinary Action

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many times disciplinary action has been taken against (i) lecturers; (ii) other teaching staff in (a) universities; (b) other further or higher education institutions; and (iii) the nature of the offences and sanctions imposed in each of the last 10 years, broken down by institution. (AQW 3724/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The information requested has been placed in the library.

You may wish to note that the information provided for a number of the institutions is either absent or incomplete as those institutions remove disciplinary information from their records once the warning has expired.

University of Ulster: Student Transfers

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if the University of Ulster has considered transferring students from the Jordanstown Campus to Magee campus; and if not, to explain why the issue has not been considered. (AQW 3761/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The University of Ulster has stated that while, as part of its academic planning processes, it keeps the nature and campus location of its course provision under review, it does not currently have plans to transfer any courses.

You may wish to note that almost 40% of the University's students at the Jordanstown campus are completing their courses by part-time study and this is an important part of the University's widening access policy. The University advises that these students are taught by the same staff and use the same facilities as the full-time students, often sharing classes. Therefore, in transferring courses, the University must consider its part-time students who cannot realistically be expected to travel to the Coleraine or Magee campuses.

I can advise, however, that the University is in the process of introducing three new courses at the Magee campus, comprising two at undergraduate level and one at postgraduate level, in areas where there is a high level of demand and which will provide further opportunities for both full-time and part-time students at the Magee Campus.

Northern Ireland Science Park Foundation

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) what procedures were followed by the University of Ulster in August 2005 when it returned the £4.5 million received from the Northern Ireland Science Park Foundation in 2003 to support Science Park activities at the Coleraine and Magee campuses; (ii) what decision-making processes were followed in deciding to abort the Science Park project; (iii) to indicate if (a) local councils; (b) local politicians; (c) the general public; (d) staff in the university; (e) the University Senate; or (f) the University Council, were informed of the decision; and (iv) in what format they were informed of or involved in the decision. (AQW 3763/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: This question relates to a matter between the University and the Northern Ireland Science Park and, as such, my Department does not hold, or have access to the requested information.

Redundancies: West Tyrone

Mr A Bresland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action his Department is taking in response to recent redundancies in the West Tyrone constituency. (AQO 637/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department has provided information and advice to those made redundant in West Tyrone to help them find alternative employment or improve their skills through the Department's employment, training and further education programmes. Jobs & Benefits staff delivered on-site clinics to those who had received notice of redundancy. All redundant workers who attended Jobs & Benefits offices or JobCentres received the full range of employment and careers services.

An awareness event outlining the Department's services will be held in Omagh on 17 February. This is one of a series of events targeted at local councillors and business representatives.

Student Fees

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when the final report on the review of Student Fees will be published. (AQO 638/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: I have received an interim report from Joanne Stuart, independent chairperson of the review of variable fees and student finance arrangements. I am very grateful for all the hard work that Joanne has undertaken.

The chairperson is now finalising this report to take account of further key data on enrolments published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency on 14th January 2010.

I expect to receive the chairperson's final report in the next few weeks. It will then be brought before the Committee for Employment and Learning in advance of a public consultation exercise, at which stage it will be published.

People not in Education, Employment or Training

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on his Department's plans to reduce the number of people not in education, employment or training. (AQO 639/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department has almost completed a Scoping study to learn more about those who are not in education, employment or training. Any action plan or strategy resulting from this study will need to be carried forward on a cross-departmental basis and with this in mind I intend to bring the results of this work to my Executive colleagues for consideration. Much work is already being done by the statutory and voluntary sectors to help the life chances of these young people. I was delighted to have the opportunity to meet with representatives of Barnardos and address those attending their important event last December which highlighted the key issues facing all of us who have a role to play.

University of Ulster: Magee Campus

Ms M Anderson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on his consideration of the Magee Strategic Development Plan; and whether he is prepared to bid for the additional resources required to increase the Maximum Student Number cap. (AQO 640/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The University has submitted a Strategic Outline Case for the Magee Strategic Development Plan. This is required under the revised guidance for economic appraisals issued by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). The Strategic Outline Case is currently being considered by economists within my Department and clarification on a number of issues has been sought from the university.

I have already stated that my Department would consider working with the University to develop funding bids for expansion at Magee in the context of the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review. The potential costs of expanding student numbers at Magee will, however, need to be considered in line with other Departmental priorities. Each additional 1,000 students costs approximately £8 million per annum.

I will also need to take into account the contribution of the North West Regional College where 12% of the current intake, in academic year 2009/10, are studying at higher education level.

In 2007/08 the number of students from the North West region, enrolled on a full-time undergraduate course at a Higher Education Institution in the UK, as a percentage of the 18 to 21 year old population in the North West region is around 4-5% higher than the percentage from NI as a whole.

Economic Crisis

Mr A McFarland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how his Department has sought to obtain feedback from councils and business representatives in different parts of Northern Ireland on the effectiveness of his Department's response to the economic downturn. (AQO 641/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: I am currently carrying out a series of awareness raising events aimed at highlighting the services available from my Department. These events are targeted at local businesses and elected representatives in the six Workforce Development Forum regions. The first event was held in Londonderry before Christmas and was well attended and well received. The Department has held a number of JobFairs and advice forums as part of its response to the economic downturn, formal and informal feedback is requested from all attendees.

Portrush: Catering College Site

Mr A McQuillan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the development of the site of the former Catering College in Portrush. (AQO 642/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The site and buildings of the former catering college in Portrush are owned by the University of Ulster. The University advised in July 2009 that these were surplus to requirements and that planning permission for residential use had been obtained. It was proposed that the site be offered for sale at an appropriate time with all proceeds being reinvested in the University's core business. The University of Ulster has advised me that the position has not changed.

In July 2009 the site had already been decommissioned. To reduce security and health and safety risks, and associated costs, the University had proposed that the buildings be demolished. The University has advised me that the demolition of the buildings is now complete.

Universities: Funding

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he intends to cut funding for universities, given the funding cuts to universities in Great Britain. (AQO 643/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Subject to the outcome of the consultation process and following decisions of the Executive, I intend to at least maintain current levels of revenue funding as far as possible.

Northwest Lifelong Learning Association

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much financial support his Department has provided to the North West Life Long Learning facility in the last two years. (AQO 644/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: NorthWest Lifelong Learning Association's Skills 4Service Project is funded by the Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme 2007-13, which is managed by my Department. Funding commenced in April 2008, and in the 2008/09 financial year the Association was paid £108,000, of which £66,461 came from the European Social Fund and the remainder from my Department. To date, in the current financial year the project has been paid £128,258, of which £78,930 came from the European Social Fund and the remainder from the Department. In addition, a total of £3,825 has been paid to the Association as an Employer subsidy under the New Deal programme, during the current financial year.

DEL Budget

Mr P Butler asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the impact of the proposed cuts to his budget, following the recent statement from the Minister of Finance and Personnel. (AQO 646/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department will take forward a range of measures to deliver the additional savings of £19.7million current expenditure and £9.0million capital investment next year agreed by the Executive. As part of the Budget 2008-11 process the current expenditure baseline increased by £49m in 2010/11 and wherever possible the savings have been targeted at these growth monies, in order to protect the existing 2009/10 level of provision. These savings derive from smaller than planned increases and greater efficiencies in higher education funding and a review of priorities in both employment support programmes and the further education sector. In addition, outcomes achieved from current levels of support to external organisations will be examined with a view to achieving the same with less. The capital savings are being realised from changes in the level of funding for infrastructure in higher education.

DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Arntz Belting site in Derry

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether the Arntz Belting site in Derry is subject to any covenants on usage or occupation ; and to detail the nature of any such conditions.

(AQW 3822/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): Invest NI no longer has any controlling interest in the estate or the sites therein. Invest NI's predecessor, the Industrial Development Board, sold the freehold of the Arntz Belting site in 1994 in line with prevailing Government policy at the time. Invest NI therefore has no record of any covenants or controls which may currently apply on the usage of the site.

Flights Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of flights booked for Civil Servants in her Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these flights, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3967/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Financial Year	Number of Flights Booked	Cost	Loss of Revenue
2005-06	18	£2,392	£352
2006-07	18	£2,060	£856
2007-08	12	£858	£285
2008-09	15	£6,194	£1,174
2009-10 To Date	12	£2,204	£29
Total	75	£13,708	£2,696

Hotels Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of nights in hotels booked for Civil Servants in her Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these hotel rooms, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3968/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Financial	Number of Hotel	Cost	Loss of
2005-06	5	£464	£120
2006-07	6	£1,071	£0
2007-08	3	£648	£0
2008-09	14	£3,572	£1,497
2009-10 To Date	5	£1,128	£1,000
Total	33	£6,883	£2,617

Offshore Wind Farms

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action her Department has taken since 2007 to develop off-shore wind farms.

(AQW 4004/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DETI has undertaken a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of its draft Offshore Renewable Energy Strategic Action Plan 2009-2020 to develop offshore wind and marine renewables in Northern Ireland waters. The draft Plan and the SEA have been issued for consultation and, when finalised in Spring 2010, will form the framework within which The Crown Estate can issue a call for offshore wind and marine renewable energy projects in Northern Ireland waters in 2010-2011.

Tidal Energy Resources

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if her Department has set targets for the amount of electricity generated from tidal energy resources; and if she intends to review these targets. (AQW 4006/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DETI is currently consulting on a draft Offshore Renewable Energy Strategic Action Plan 2009-2020 to develop offshore wind and marine renewables in Northern Ireland waters. This draft Plan has proposed a target of 300 MW of tidal energy by 2020. This target will be reviewed in light of the consultation feedback prior to the finalisation of the Plan in Spring 2010.

Broadband Speeds

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 3333/10, to detail the current broadband speeds available at the 166 telephone exchanges; and what speed will be available after the proposed upgrade. (AQW 4050/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: All of the BT exchanges listed in AQW 3333/10 can currently deliver speeds of at least 8 Megabits per second (Mbps). Once the investment roll-out phase of the next generation broadband contract has been completed all 166 exchanges will be delivering a minimum of 24Mbps. However, in each instance, the actual speeds experienced by many customers will be less than that available at the exchange because of the significant effect distance has on broadband speeds. It is also the case that significantly higher speeds can be provided from all these exchanges should customers require these services and be willing to pay the appropriate charges.

Fuel Tsar

Dr A McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, following the overwhelming support in the Belfast Telegraph poll for the establishment of a Fuel Tsar, what plans she has to set up a regulatory body to protect consumers and to ensure that oil suppliers operate an open, transparent and fair pricing policy. (AQW 4163/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department is committed to ensuring a diverse and competitive energy market and is working with the Utility Regulator to ensure electricity and gas costs are as low as possible. DETI agrees with the Regulator's assessment that regulation of the local oil industry would not protect Northern Ireland consumers from volatile movements in international oil prices. It remains unclear if significant benefit could be achieved by regulation and the creation of a Fuel Tsar, which would impose sizable regulatory costs on a competitive oil supply and distribution sector. This, in turn, would impact on the cost of fuel to business and domestic users. It is also important to note that neither Great Britain nor the Republic of Ireland regulates the oil sector.

DETI is committed to work with the Northern Ireland Consumer Council and the Utility Regulator to promote energy efficiency, and with DSD to reduce fuel poverty. As part of this process DETI has put in place voluntary agreements with the Northern Ireland Oil Federation and Federation of Petroleum Suppliers, who together represent most of the local large distributors, to encourage consumers to use energy more efficiently thereby reducing their fuel bills.

The Rural Economy

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to improve investment, enterprise and employment opportunities in Mid-Ulster and other rural areas. (AQO 657/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department, through the support mechanisms provided by Invest NI, continues to actively assist business development projects in Mid-Ulster and across Northern Ireland.

Between 2002/03 and 2009/09, Invest NI made 1,825 offers of assistance to businesses in Mid-Ulster. These were valued at £38 million and have leveraged a total of £224 million of new investment in the constituency. They included support for both foreign and locally-owned companies such as Powerscreen, McCloskey International, SDC Trailers and the McEvoy Group.

My Department also continues to work closely with the councils in Mid-Ulster to identify locally based innovation, entrepreneurship and R&D projects that have the potential to be supported under the current European Sustainable Competitiveness Programme's Local Economic Development measure.

Of course there is much more that still needs to be done, and my Department remains fully committed to working in partnership with the councils and business bodies in Mid-Ulster to continue to support worthwhile economic development opportunities.

Enterprise Finance Guarantee Scheme

Mrs C McGill asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the role of the main banks in the Enterprise Finance Guarantee scheme. (AQO 658/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Enterprise Finance Guarantee scheme is a UK wide initiative of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. It provides participating banks with a 75% guarantee against loans to businesses. The decision to lend is entirely a matter for the banks concerned, based on their assessment of the proposal put forward by the business. The participating banks in Northern Ireland are Bank of Ireland, First Trust Bank, Northern Bank, Ulster Bank, Barclays, HSBC and Alliance & Leicester.

Details of the Enterprise Finance Guarantee scheme and a general guide to accessing business finance, developed by the Institute of Directors, the British Bankers' Association and Invest Northern Ireland, are available on nibusinessinfo.co.uk.

Gas Network

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the extension of the gas network to western areas. (AQO 659/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department, in conjunction with the Utility Regulator, has commissioned consultants to undertake a study to determine the technical and economic feasibility of bringing natural gas to towns in the west and remaining areas of the north-west of Northern Ireland. The study is nearing completion and I expect to receive the report shortly.

Foreign Direct Investment

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given that her Department will be limited in its ability to award capital grants for foreign direct investment in the future, what steps she is taking to ensure that there will be equality of opportunity across Northern Ireland to avail of such grants. (AQO 660/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Looking forward, the EU State Aid thresholds for the use of Selective Assistance to industry in Northern Ireland will gradually decline until the scheme comes to an end in 2013. However, in my recent statement to the Assembly on the Independent Review of Economic Development Policy (IREP), I signalled my intention to ensure that a strong case is made for a new scheme post 2013.

In the interim, DETI, through Invest NI, will continue to use its resources to help rebuild the economy in the immediate aftermath of the recession, both to encourage export-led growth in locally-owned companies and

to attract new inward investment. In the short term this may require ongoing financial assistance to support employment, and before the ability to use SFA comes to an end.

The issue of how financial assistance is allocated is an issue that I am frequently asked about, in particular as to why one location as opposed to another benefits from an investment. That is why I instructed the IREP Panel to specifically consider the issue of the sub-regional distribution of inward investment, and particularly, my Department's ability to influence this. As expected the Panel concluded that there is little that can be done to influence specific location decisions and that companies must be allowed to locate where they generate the highest investment returns.

Lastly, and to conclude, financial assistance is available to all companies with eligible and viable projects that meet additionality and value for money thresholds.

INTERREG IV

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many projects within her Department are being held up by the delay in funding from Interreg IV. (AQO 661/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DETI continues to work closely with the Special EU Programmes Body, the Managing Authority for the INTERREG IVA programme, to expedite applications under the Enterprise and Tourism themes.

I can advise that no projects are currently being delayed within DETI.

The Green Economy

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans her Department has to promote a green economy in the next financial year. (AQO 662/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I chair a cross departmental working group which amongst other things, is looking at the opportunities to maximise the economic benefits offered by sustainable energy in particular.

Invest NI is leading this work and during the next year will continue to offer a range of activities to promote the Green Economy.

Budget and approvals permitting these will include funding resource efficiency programmes such as the Carbon Trust, which aim to deliver economic benefits through waste prevention/minimisation and by encouraging the use of sustainable energy and clean technologies.

Likewise consultancy support will be available to business for scoping or implementing sustainable development projects, along with advice and information on sustainable energy solutions from Invest NI's Sustainable Development Team.

Invest NI will continue to be actively engaged in the development of the renewables sector in Northern Ireland through designated resources to identify business opportunities within the sector and to build awareness of these within local industry.

Over the coming months my Department will also be working closely with colleagues in OFMDFM to provide input into the Draft Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Strategy Implementation Plan, and in doing so, will seek to ensure the realisation of the full potential that exists in promoting a Sustainable Economy.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Review of Public Administration

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on the Review of Public Administration and councils re-organisation. (AQW 3886/10)

Minister of the Environment (Mr E Poots): The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, which includes provisions to make preliminary arrangements for local government reorganisation was introduced to the Assembly on 22 June 2009. The Bill has completed its Committee Stage and will proceed to Consideration Stage in the next few weeks.

It is proposed that policy proposals for the reorganisation of local government will be taken forward in the Local Government (Reorganisation) Bill, which is currently with the Executive. Subject to Executive agreement, the proposals will be issued for consultation as soon as possible.

The PwC economic appraisal was published back in October and the Strategic Leader Board considered the responses to the appraisal at its meeting on 9 December.

The preferred option (Transformation with Regional Collaboration – Option 5) recommended by the Economic Appraisal will:

Realise the vision of strong local government in Northern Ireland with 11 new councils working to ensure positive outcomes for citizens, communities and businesses; and opting to collaborate with each other locally or regionally.

This option provides the opportunity to deliver a world-class, cutting-edge, effective, efficient and value-for-money system of local government in Northern Ireland.

In response to the Stakeholder Engagement on the report, from across the local government sector, some concerns were raised in relation to the proposed Business Service Organisation. I have therefore, requested that local government, through NILGA, put forward an alternative solution to the proposed Business Service Organisation with the intention of discussing this new option in detail at the next Strategic Leadership Board on 25 February 2010. With regards to the Single Waste Disposal Authority this has been supported in principle subject to a detailed business case.

I have had initial discussions with the Finance Minister to explore the implementation and longer-term funding options. I feel there is a reasonable case to be made that the funding for the reform should come from both central and local government and have therefore asked the local government members of the Strategic Leadership Board to consider this and to give their views on what proportion of the costs set out in the PwC Report might be funded by local government. Once responses are received, I will consider them with all the other relevant information before putting detailed proposals to the Executive as early as possible.

I have also considered the Final Recommendations Report of the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner and have circulated a paper to Executive colleagues for consideration. Subject to their agreement, the Final Report, draft Local Government (Boundaries) Order and a statement about modifications will be laid before the Assembly for consideration as soon as possible to allow elections to take place to the new local government districts in May 2011.

Wind Farm Applications in North Antrim

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the windfarm applications in North Antrim that were submitted between 2005 and 2008 which are still in the planning system; (ii) the reason for the delays; and (iii) which applications are expected to be completed this year. (AQW 3888/10)

Minister of the Environment:

- (i) Four applications were submitted in the North Antrim Constituency between 2005 and 2008 and are still in the system. They are:

G/2006/0754/F Elginny Hill (10 turbines, 20MW), G/2006/0842/F Rathsherry (9 turbines, 20MW), D/2006/0599/F Glenbuck 2 (3 turbines, 7MW) and D/2008/0404/F Corkey Extension (1 turbine, 2.5MW)

- (ii) Windfarms raise complex policy and other issues as detailed in PPS 18. These applications are accompanied by an Environmental Impact Statement which considers the likely significant environmental effect of the proposals. In many cases, the information received has proved to be unsatisfactory and Further Environmental Information (FEI) needs to be submitted by the applicant.
- (iii) The Elginny Hill and Rathsherry applications were the subjects of requests for substantial FEI and the applicants have submitted information which is currently under consideration. There is also a very high level of third party objections to these schemes. The Glenbuck 2 application has also been the subject of a

FEI request. The information has only recently been received but is still unsatisfactory and the applicant has been asked to address this as a matter of urgency. The Corkey Extension application has been the subject of discussion with the Planning Service. To address the concerns of consultees, the applicant has been advised to withdraw the application and re-submit it. Failure to address the matters raised may result in a refusal of permission

It is anticipated that all four applications will be determined this year.

Habitat or Refuge for Wildfowl

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if there is any financial assistance available for projects to create a habitat or refuge for wildfowl. (AQW 3936/10)

Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) provides funding towards projects that conserve and enhance key elements of the environment and its wildlife through its Natural Heritage Grant Programme. Grant applications are assessed through an annual competition and grant awarded according to priority and budget.

Non-government organisations and district councils may apply for funding where the work is not covered by other government grant schemes. Applications from individuals will only be considered where the funding contributes directly to a habitat or species action plan or if there is direct public benefit meeting the objectives of the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (NI) Order 1985.

NIEA supports a number of NGOs to manage sites which provide habitat and refuge for wildfowl.

Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the work he carried out at the Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December. (AQW 3972/10)

Minister of the Environment: I was in Denmark for two reasons. Firstly, I wanted to show my interest in the UN Climate Change conference. Secondly, I was there to visit energy from waste and recycling facilities as we are about to embark on the largest waste infrastructure development programme ever undertaken in Northern Ireland. The climate change and waste agendas are connected in that if we reduce landfill we will be reducing greenhouse gas emissions that are linked to climate change.

In terms of the UN Conference negotiations it was important for me, as the Environment Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive, to show support to UK negotiators in the very difficult task of securing agreement on reducing emissions globally.

In the run up to the event I had emphasised the need for any deal reached to be truly global. All countries must commit to tackling the problem, otherwise economic activity will just be displaced and there will be no overall benefit to the environment. In Copenhagen itself I was given a firsthand account of progress at the negotiations and afforded the opportunity to discuss my views directly with UK and devolved administration Ministers and officials. I also attended the Scottish Government's "Low Carbon Mission" event where I met with my Scottish and Welsh counterparts as well as a wide range of interested parties from all over the world.

Being able to link attendance at the conference with visits to a number of waste facilities confirmed for me the importance of the lessons countries such as Denmark have to teach us as we move towards establishing the network of new waste facilities Northern Ireland needs. The sites I visited included one of Denmark's twenty-nine energy from waste plants as well as recycling facilities, and provided ample proof that incineration facilities can be integrated effectively into local environments without adversely impacting on air quality or health. They also demonstrated that energy from waste plants are not the enemy of recycling but rather that a sophisticated and effective waste management system needs both. It will take a high level of investment by both local and central government to bring this about, and central government has already stepped up to the mark in this regard with a commitment of £200 million in the form of the Strategic Waste Infrastructure Fund. What will be important as we move forward is to ensure that we have an effective vehicle for delivery of the infrastructure, and I am happy to take this opportunity to endorse the work done to date in this regard by the three Waste Management Groups, while acknowledging the scale of the challenges that still lie ahead.

Offshore Wind-Farms

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department has taken in relation to developing offshore wind-farms since 2007. (AQW 3974/10)

Minister of the Environment: The Department of the Environment is responsible for regulating construction activities within the marine environment. Planning permission is required for development up to the low water mark and a FEPA licence for construction from the high water mark.

In carrying out its regulatory functions the Department seeks to engage positively with those who bring forward proposals for all forms of low carbon energy production.

Spot Checks on Buses and Coaches

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 3115/10, if the spot checks carried out on buses and coaches during the reported period, from April 2007 to September 2009, were randomly selected or targeted. (AQW 4010/10)

Minister of the Environment: During the period April 2007 to September 2009, the Driver & Vehicle Agency carried out spot checks on 903 buses and coaches resulting in 281 operators being reported with a view to prosecution. One of the Agency's strategic objectives is to reduce the number of illegal operators and vehicles using the roads through intelligence-led targeted enforcement. The 281 detections came from a combination of targeted operations, based on complaints from the bus industry and members of the public, or in relation to events that traditionally attract a large number of illegal operators and random selection by DVA enforcement staff.

Strategic Waste Management Board

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment what policies have been adopted by the Strategic Waste Management Board to ensure that land-fill waste disposal sites, selected by waste management groups, adhere to the laws for protected species. (AQW 4035/10)

Minister of the Environment: The Strategic Waste Board is an advisory body established to oversee and monitor implementation of the Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy. It is not part of its role to establish policies for the approval of landfill development proposals, this being a matter for the relevant statutory authorities, Planning Service and NIEA. It is the responsibility of the three district council Waste Management Groups to identify the type, scale and locations for waste facilities within their areas, and to ensure that they comply with all statutory requirements.

Landfill Sites

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment (i) if he will review the capacity of land fill sites, given that the volume of waste has fallen; and (ii) what steps he intends to take to ensure that waste is disposed of locally. (AQW 4036/10)

Minister of the Environment: In Northern Ireland District Councils are responsible for the management of controlled waste and it is they who decide what arrangements are appropriate for the disposal of waste within their area. In developing their approach consideration is given to the need for, siting and capacity of landfill sites and their resultant proposals form part of the waste management plans drawn up by the Waste Management Groups. The waste management plans, which are subject to full public consultation and Departmental approval, were last approved in 2006. The Waste Management Groups are due to submit new waste management plans in 2011 and this will provide a further opportunity to consider Councils' proposed arrangements.

I acknowledge and very much welcome the reduction in the amount of waste going to landfill and I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate District Councils for playing their part in significantly reducing the amount of biodegradable municipal waste being sent to landfill.

Hotels Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of nights in hotels booked for Civil Servants in his Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these hotel rooms, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4048/10)

Minister of the Environment: The number of hotel rooms booked for civil servants in DOE but never used is not recorded by Departmental Travel Desks. Hotel room expenditure is usually paid for by civil servants who claim it back through travel and subsistence expenses and therefore, this information could only be researched at disproportionate expense. However, the cost of unused hotel bookings is likely to be very low as Departmental travel booking policy allows for the majority of cancellations to be fully refunded at relatively short notice.

DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Constructing Excellence NI

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the value for money to the taxpayer; (ii) the value to the construction industry; and (iii) the value to the Executive and its Departments, provided by Constructing Excellence NI. (AQW 3820/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): The construction industry makes a very valuable contribution to the economy of Northern Ireland. It has an annual turnover of approximately £3bn and employs almost 70,000 workers.

In 2006, a Construction Industry Capacity Study identified the need to establish Constructing Excellence Northern Ireland (CEni) to assist the construction industry to deliver improved performance resulting in a sustainable construction industry that could compete in the global market.

Under the strategic leadership of its Management Committee CEni has achieved its primary objectives. In particular it has:-

- i. Facilitated communication among industry, clients, consultants, government and academia to address sector challenges and deliver improved performance;
- ii. Developed and disseminated best practice knowledge through local engagement and via the wider UK Constructing Excellence network;
- iii. Assisted Government in delivering the 'Achieving Excellence in Construction' initiative through focusing on performance measuring and benchmarking;
- iv. Improved the industry image by taking action to create a step change in culture and in the development of people;
- v. Engaged with the community and the industry and its clients to develop a more sustainable built environment; and
- vi. Assisted Further and Higher Education in their collaboration with industry in order to keep teaching and research relevant to industry needs.

By forming a bridge between the construction industry, government and academia, CEni has assisted the industry to develop and embed best practice and improved overall performance.

Improvement in the industry's performance means that better performing contractors, consultants and government clients are available to deliver construction projects that represent best value for money for the Executive and ultimately for the tax payers of Northern Ireland.

A benefits realisation report on the CEni project will be reviewed by CPD on its completion in April 2010.

Constructing Excellence NI

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the running costs of Constructing Excellence NI for each of the last three years; and to provide a breakdown of these annual costs. (AQW 3821/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The table overleaf details the running costs of Constructing Excellence in Northern Ireland (CEni) for the four year period from 5 April 2006 to 4 April 2010. The costs are set out in calendar years in line with CEni's financial reporting arrangements to its Management Committee. CEni Running Costs from 5 April 2006 to 4 April 2010

Cost	2006 April-Dec £	2007 Jan-Dec £	2008 Jan-Dec £	2009 Jan-Dec £	2010 ⁴ Jan-Apr £
Director and Executive Assistant ¹	30,292.96	43,334.15	46,751.83	49,303.21	13,292.88
Payroll (Staff Salaries)		50,492.66	152,290.23	149,644.86	30,500.00
Non Payroll ² (Miscellaneous)		11,691.63	19,232.40	19,579.98	25,500.00
Overheads & Services ³	12,117.18	42,207.38	87,309.78	87,411.22	27,717.15
Annual Totals	42,410.14	147,725.82	305,584.24	305,939.27	97,010.03
Accumulative Totals	42,410.14	190,135.96	495,720.20	801,659.47	898,669.50

Note 1: The Director and the Executive Assistant work on behalf of CEni for 50% of their time.

Note 2: The 'Non-Payroll' cost includes consumables and printing, reimbursable expenses, telephones, advertising and the fees associated with employing a consultant to undertake the work of a Development Officer, who resigned at the end of July 2009, for the remaining 8 months of 2009-10.

Note 3: The University's 'overhead and services' covers accommodation; operating costs such as heating, lighting and cleaning and the provision of IT, HR and financial support services.

Note 4: The figures for 2010 include projected costs for the period Jan to 4 April 2010.

Constructing Excellence NI

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many staff are currently employed in Constructing Excellence NI; and how does this compare to each of the last three years. (AQW 3823/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The table overleaf summarises the number of staff employed by Constructing Excellence in Northern Ireland (CEni) for the four year period from 5 April 2006 to 4 April 2010.

STAFFING LEVELS IN CENI FROM 5 APRIL 2006 TO 4 APRIL 2010

Post	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
Director ¹	1 x 9 Mths	1 x 12 Mths	1 x 12 Mths	1 x 12 Mths
Executive Assistant ¹	1 x 9 Mths	1 x 12 Mths	1 x 12 Mths	1 x 12 Mths
Development Manager	1 x 3 Mths	1 x 12 Mths	1 x 12 Mths	1 x 12 Mths
Development Officer 1	0	1 x 2.5 Mths	1 x 12 Mths	1 x 12 Mths
Development Officer 2	0	1 x 2.5 Mths	1 x 12 Mths	1 x 4 Mths
Development Officer 3 (Temp Cons) ²	0	0	0	1 x 8 Mths
Communications Officer	0	1 x 5 Mths	1 x 12 Mths	1 x 10 Mths

Note 1: The Director and the Executive Assistant work on behalf of CEni for 50% of their time.

Note 2: Following the resignation of Development Officer 2 at the end of July 2009, CEni employed a consultant to undertake the duties of Development Officer 2 for the remaining 8 months of 2009-10.

Buildsoft Programme

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the cost to his Department of acquiring the 'Buildsoft' programme. (AQW 3866/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The cost to Central Procurement Directorate of the initial set-up of the 'Buildsoft' software program, staff training, annual licence fee for all Centres of Procurement Expertise involved in construction and the provision of technical support is detailed in the Table below.

COST OF 'BUILDSOFT' SOFTWARE

Year	Service	Cost
2007	Initial set-up and staff training	£6,850
	Annual licence & technical support	£12,500
2008	Annual licence & technical support	£12,500
2009	Annual licence & technical support	£12,500
	Modification to software to allow sustainability objectives to be recorded	£3,000
2010	Annual licence & technical support	£12,500
Total		£59,850

Buildsoft Programme

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the procurement process used to acquire the 'Buildsoft' programme. (AQW 3867/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The procurement process used by Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) to acquire the 'Buildsoft' programme commenced with the preparation of a specification for a program that could be used by CPD and the Centres of Procurement Expertise to record, calculate, benchmark and report on a suite of Key Performance Indicators for construction projects.

Competitive tenders were invited on 13 October 2006. Two tenders were received and the contract was awarded on 13 December 2006 to Building Software Ltd ('Buildsoft') who submitted the most economically advantageous tender.

Constructing Excellence NI

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the relationship between Constructing Excellence NI and his Department. (AQW 3868/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Within the Department of Finance and Personnel, Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) is responsible for interfacing with Constructing Excellence in Northern Ireland (CEni).

CEni is a partnership between government, the construction industry and the University of Ulster. CPD entered into an agreement with the University to grant fund CEni for a four year period from 5 April 2006 to 4 April 2010. The relationship between CPD and CEni is subject to Terms and Conditions of Grant and an associated Financial Memorandum.

CPD's engagement with CEni is principally through its participation in the CEni Management Committee which provides strategic direction and leadership for the CEni project.

Constructing Excellence NI

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the relationship between Constructing Excellence NI and Central Procurement Directorate. (AQW 3869/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Central Procurement Directorate (CPD), within the Department of Finance and Personnel, is responsible for interfacing with Constructing Excellence in Northern Ireland (CEni).

CEni is a partnership between government, the construction industry and the University of Ulster. CPD entered into an agreement with the University to grant fund CEni for a four year period from 5 April 2006 to 4 April 2010. The relationship between CPD and CEni is subject to Terms and Conditions of Grant and an associated Financial Memorandum.

CPD's engagement with CEni is principally through its participation in the CEni Management Committee which provides strategic direction and leadership for the CEni project.

Proposed A5 Road Scheme

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions he has had with the Minister for Regional Development regarding the provision of finance for the proposed A5 road. (AQW 3889/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have not had direct discussions with the Minister for Regional Development regarding the financing of the A5 road scheme.

However, the 2007 CSR provided DRD with their requested funding for this scheme in the budget period 2007-2011. The current ISNI included indicative allocations for the scheme in subsequent years and also reflected the £400m contribution from the RoI Government for the joint A5 and A8 Initiative.

In addition, there have been a number of meetings between senior officials in my department and those of DRD along with senior officials from the Republic's Department of Finance and Department of Transport.

Buildsoft Programme

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the running costs of the Buildsoft programme for each of the last three years. (AQW 3959/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The annual running cost of the 'Buildsoft' program in each of the last three years was £12,500. This covers the annual licence fee and the provision of technical support to all Centres of Procurement Expertise.

In 2009, modifications were made to the system to allow the recording of performance data against sustainability objectives at a one-off additional cost of £3,000.

Buildsoft Programme

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) which branch within his Department has responsibility for the Buildsoft programme, including the development and maintenance of the programme; and (ii) how many staff within this branch are trained to use Buildsoft software. (AQW 3960/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Within the Department of Finance and Personnel, Quality Standards Branch in Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) is responsible for the development, management and maintenance of the 'Buildsoft' program.

There are two staff in Quality Standards Branch who are fully trained to use the 'Buildsoft' software.

Individual project managers, across CPD and other Centres of Procurement Expertise, are responsible for entering and maintaining project specific data on the system.

Buildsoft Programme

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what the cost is to his Department for training one member of staff to use the Buildsoft programme. (AQW 3961/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The initial set-up cost of the 'Buildsoft' program was £6,850. This included the configuration of the database to suit the needs of Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) and the

Centres of Procurement Expertise (CoPEs). The setup cost also included the creation of training materials and the delivery of training to a total of 31 staff from CPD and the CoPEs. The cost of training one member of staff is not, therefore, separately identifiable.

Buildsoft Programme

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel on what date the Buildsoft programme became operational within his Department. (AQW 3962/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The 'Buildsoft' program became operational on 23 March 2007 following configuration of the database, testing and staff training.

Buildsoft Programme

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if staff input can be traced on the Buildsoft programme; and if so, how many staff have inputted into the Buildsoft programme. (AQW 3963/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Prior to December 2009 the 31 staff from Central Procurement Directorate and the Centres of Procurement Expertise, who were trained in the use of the 'Buildsoft' program, shared common logins with other staff in their business areas. The entry of project specific data on to the 'Buildsoft' program was therefore recorded only by business area. Prior to this date it is not therefore possible to identify individual staff who input data on to the 'Buildsoft' program.

Following the release of a new version of the software on 11 December 2009, personal logins were issued to 184 staff. From this date, 12 staff have entered data on to the 'Buildsoft' program.

Obesity: Deaths

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel the number of deaths in which obesity was mentioned as a cause on the death certificate in each of the last five years. (AQW 4100/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Obesity is only recorded on a death certificate where the doctor certifying the death considers this to be the underlying cause of death or where obesity has contributed to the death.

The attached table gives the number of deaths registered in Northern Ireland by year, 2004 to 2008, and the number of deaths registered in the first three quarters of 2009P, where obesity was mentioned on the death certificate.

¹ International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision code E66.

^P Provisional data

TABLE: NUMBER OF OBESITY RELATED DEATHS REGISTERED IN NORTHERN IRELAND, 2004-2009 QUARTER 1 TO QUARTER 3P.

Registration Year	Number of obesity related deaths
2004	21
2005	26
2006	30
2007	30
2008	33
2009 Q1-Q3P	33

Northern Ireland Dormant Accounts Scheme

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the Northern Ireland Dormant Accounts Scheme. (AQW 4105/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Public consultation on the spending priorities for the Northern Ireland Dormant Accounts Scheme was held between 6th August to 29 October 2009.

127 responses were received from a broad range of private individuals and organisations representing community and voluntary organisations, faith based organisations, children and young people organisations, organisations supporting the elderly and disabled, statutory authorities, charities and financial institutions. I am currently considering these responses to ensure that a focused set of priorities is established and that the additional money is used to provide real benefits to all communities across Northern Ireland.

Subject to endorsement by OFMDFM, I will bring recommendations on the proposed spending priorities to the Executive in due course.

UK Migration Impact Fund

Ms A Lo asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if their Department has received its allocation of £978,000 from the UK Migration Impact Fund to address pressures on public services relating to the transitional impacts of legal migration. (AQO 673/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Communities Secretary Hazel Blears and the Home Secretary Jacqui Smith announced the details of the Migration Impact Fund on 19 March 2009.

As a consequence of this decision, the Northern Ireland Executive received £978,000 in additional current expenditure funding for 2009-10, through the Barnett formula.

However, any and all allocations received from the Barnett Formula are unhypothecated, that is to say that they are available to the Executive to spend in correspondence with local needs and priorities.

The additional funding arising from this Barnett consequential was included in the overall funding position considered by the Executive as part of the 2009-10 June Monitoring round.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Cancer Survival Rates

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he is aware of the cancer survival rates in the rest of the UK, and the Republic of Ireland, and other European countries; and how these compare to the survival rate in Northern Ireland. (AQW 3712/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): The Northern Ireland Cancer Registry (NICR) provides accurate, timely information on cancers occurring in the population of Northern Ireland for research, planning and education, so the burden of disease may be reduced.

The latest report detailing the survival of cancer patients in Northern Ireland Survival of cancer patients in Northern Ireland: 1993-2004, which was published in October 2007, can be accessed at –

<http://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/nicr/FileStore/PDF/Survival/Filetoupload,81422,en.pdf>

In addition, NICR, in conjunction with the National Cancer Registry of Ireland, published a report in April 2009, Cancer in Ireland 1994 – 2004: A comprehensive Report. The report contains data for the whole of Ireland and can be accessed at –

<http://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/nicr/FileStore/Filetoupload,177823,en.pdf>

Both the documents provide comparisons of cancer survival rates with the rest of the UK and other European countries.

Drugs for Preventative Conditions

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much of his annual budget is spent on drugs for preventative conditions. (AQW 3713/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is not possible to determine how much of the annual spend for Health Service Drugs went on drugs for preventative conditions as such information is not collated.

Anti-obesity Drugs

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much of his annual budget is spent on anti-obesity drugs. (AQW 3714/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The cost of anti-obesity drugs to the HSC was £2.4m in 2008/2009. This represents 0.06% of my 2008/2009 revenue budget.

Hospital Services

Mrs M O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the level of community involvement in planning hospital services over the last ten years. (AQW 3718/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A review of acute hospital services (Developing Better Services) was commissioned in August 2000 with the aim of modernising the acute hospital system. The recommendations from the review were subject to full public consultation prior to final Ministerial approval in 2003. Hospital service changes arising from the review were, unless immediate health and safety issues dictated otherwise, further consulted on through individual Health and Social Care Trusts and, where appropriate, passed for Ministerial approval.

Long-term Carers

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people registered as long-term carers in each of the last five years. (AQW 3721/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of people registered as long-term carers is not collected centrally.

Vagus Nerve Stimulation

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain the delay in the use of Vagus nerve stimulation for patients; and when he expects this treatment to be made available. (AQW 3722/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Vagal nerve stimulation is currently available and performed at the Royal Victoria Hospital. A contracted service is in place for adults who require this treatment, however in relation to children requiring access to this service funding is sought from the HSC Board as and when required. The Trust will however endeavour to carry out the procedure as soon as possible following the approval of funding and receipt of the necessary equipment.

Ambulances

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many ambulances there are in each Health and Social Care Trust; and how many are projected over the next five years. (AQW 3729/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Regarding the first part of the question, I refer the Member to the answer I gave to AQWs 1251/10 and 1252/10 on 20 October 2009.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has advised that projected fleet requirements are calculated for Northern Ireland as a whole and it cannot, therefore, provide figures for future fleet deployment in specific areas. Deployment will be determined on the basis of NIAS's tactical deployment plan at the time

I have announced a £100m investment programme over the next ten years to modernise estate and replace vehicles and equipment for NIAS on a rolling basis. This programme will substantially lower the average age of the fleet, improving its reliability and reducing the cost of maintenance.

Knockbracken Healthcare Park: Dorothy Gardner and Rathlin Wards

Mrs N Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 3397/10, for his assessment of the adequacy of the consultation undertaken prior to the decision being taken to merge Dorothy Gardiner and Rathlin wards at Knockbracken. (AQW 3738/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Prior to deciding to merge Dorothy Gardner and Rathlin Wards, the Belfast Trust consulted with user and carer representatives and senior staff from within mental health services and carried out an Equality Impact Screening Assessment. They also consulted publicly in early 2009 about their proposal to reduce the reliance on inpatient beds by enhancing community mental health services. These proposals were accepted.

The Trust has agreed to consider further the provision of a female-only ward if acute provision can be reconfigured to accommodate this suggestion. In this regard the Trust has had further representation from interested parties.

Knockbracken Healthcare Park: Male and Innishfree Wards

Mrs N Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the consultation process undertaken prior to the decision to merge the Knockbracken Clinic male and Innishfree Wards. (AQW 3739/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Proposed changes and mergers on the Knockbracken site were included in the Belfast Trust's consultation 'Excellence and Choice' Documents. The merger of Knockbracken Clinic Male (KCM) and Innishfree wards is part of the Trust's resettlement strategy. Patients, their Carers and staff were consulted on the merger and support has been continually provided by User and Carer Advocates throughout the process. All appropriate community based placements identified were considered by patients, carers and advocates. Initial visits and trial periods of stay were arranged prior to confirmation of these placements.

The Trust has agreed to consider further the provision of a female-only ward if acute provision can be reconfigured to accommodate this suggestion. In this regard the Trust has had further representation from interested parties.

Knockbracken Healthcare Park: Dorothy Gardner and Rathlin Wards

Mrs N Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what evidence or advice informed the decision to maintain admissions to Windsor House despite its current state, and to merge the Dorothy Gardiner and Rathlin Wards. (AQW 3740/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Since the introduction of Belfast Home Treatment Service and improvements in systems and processes within mental health services, Belfast Trust has moved from a position where acute inpatient beds were difficult to access, to the current position where there is reduced demand for beds across the three inpatient units at Knockbracken, Mater and Belfast City Hospital sites.

Longer term, the Trust aims to have one purpose built in-patient facility for Belfast with more community-based support. The Trust has developed proposals for a new inpatient psychiatric unit and is currently consulting on these, including options for the location for the new unit.

These proposals are in line with best practice and the Bamford recommendations.

Mental Health Provision

Mrs N Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how the current decisions in respect of inpatient mental health provision in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust area will impact on future development plans for Windsor House. (AQW 3741/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Belfast Trust is currently consulting on proposals for a new inpatient psychiatric unit, including options for its location, and the outcome of this process will inform future development plans for Windsor House.

Osteomyelitis

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of diagnosed cases of Osteomyelitis; and (ii) the number of amputations resulting from Osteomyelitis, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3755/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: (i) Information is not available on the number of diagnosed cases of Osteomyelitis.

(ii) The number of amputations carried out in Health and Social Care Hospitals in Northern Ireland, where a diagnosis of Osteomyelitis was recorded, is shown in the table below;

Year	Amputations
2004/2005	47
2005/2006	36
2006/2007	44
2007/2008	54
2008/2009	53

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

Child Abuse: Ards and Strangford

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many incidents of child abuse have been investigated in (i) Ards; and (ii) Strangford, in each of the last three years. (AQW 3756/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is assumed that this question refers to child protection investigations. Information on the number of child protection investigations is not available in the format requested.

Swine Flu Vaccine

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) if there is currently an oversupply of swine flu vaccine and associated anti-virals; (ii) the monetary value of this oversupply; (iii) to outline his plans for disposal of stockpiles of these drugs in the event they are not needed; and (iv) the estimated costs of disposing of any oversupply. (AQW 3758/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is not currently an oversupply of swine flu vaccine or antivirals in Northern Ireland.

Antivirals can be used to treat the symptoms of other flu viruses, not just swine flu.

Home Help Services: Disruption

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the extent of the disruption to home help services, and other healthcare provision in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area as a consequence of untreated and impassable roads during the recent extreme weather conditions. (AQW 3764/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Western Health and Social Care Trust has advised that, since the onset of extreme weather, Trust staff and staff from the independent sector have worked extremely hard to ensure continuity of home care provision which, on a typical day, can involve 8,000 visits across the Trust. Staff have made every effort including walking great distances through snow to reach service users, accessing specialist vehicles including tractors, and working additional hours and days off.

The Trust has advised that, through these efforts, such disruption has been minimal. Where, despite these best efforts, service users could not be reached, Trust staff have liaised closely with family, neighbours and local community to ensure essential support is maintained. The Trust has also worked in partnership with other agencies, in particular the Roads Service, to help provide a coordinated response to the difficulties being experienced.

Healthcare Workers

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how his Department will ensure that healthcare workers, including home-help providers can reach patients in rural areas during times of extreme weather conditions and freezing temperatures. (AQW 3765/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Every effort is made to provide health and social care services in all communities, in all circumstances. Outside factors such as road closures have the potential to bring most of Northern Ireland, including such services as health and social care, to a temporary halt. Each situation and circumstance will be different, requiring a range of different responses.

Fracture or Broken Bone: Cost of Treating

Mrs C Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the average cost to the Health Service is for treating a fracture or broken bone. (AQW 3768/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The estimated average cost of an episode in hospital where the patient had a fracture diagnosis is £2,922 for the financial year 2007/08. 2007/08 costs are the latest costs available at this time.

It should be noted that substantial A&E, outpatient, primary care, community and personal social services may also be provided to patients who suffer fractures. Costs for these services are not collected at the level of detail required to enable an estimate of what is spent treating people a fracture or broken bone.

Medical Records: Access

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) to detail who can access patient medical records without explicit patient consent other than a doctor or the clinical caring team caring for a patient, and for what purpose; and (ii) on how many occasions patients' medical records have been accessed in such circumstances and by whom, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3804/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Patient medical records are defined as personal data within the Data Protection Act 1988. Organisations and individuals who hold medical records are required to register with the Information Commissioner as 'Data Controllers' and apply the provisions of the Data Protection Act in determining how they handle, share and disclose information, which includes access.

Ensuring appropriate access to medical records is the responsibility of each individual Data Controller. The Department does not hold centrally any data regarding access.

Department's Implementation Delivery Plan

Mrs N Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when he intends to publish the Department's Implementation Delivery Plan for the Investment Strategy. (AQW 3812/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I do not intend to publish the DHSSPS Investment Delivery Plan until there is greater clarity on the budget for the period 2011/12 to 2013/14, following the outcome of the next CSR.

Stroke Strategy

Mrs M O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the additional £9 million announced to support the Stroke Strategy, how this money is being divided between (i) statutory services, particularly acute care; and (ii) services provided by the voluntary sector, in each Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 3816/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have allocated an additional £14m over the CSR period for the implementation of the stroke strategy recommendations. This allocation is broken down as, £2 million in 2008/09, £3 million in 2009/10 and £9 million in 2010/11 and recurrently from April 2011.

The Health and Social Care Board as commissioner of health and social care services is responsible for allocating this money and its priority is to support and deliver services where needed most. I am advised that the allocation for 08/09 and 09/10 is being spent fully in stroke services and has included investment in Consultants, Allied Health Professionals and to strengthen infrastructure, staffing and training.

It has also supported service re-organisation and re-design so that the whole system, including primary, community, secondary, voluntary and independent sectors work collaboratively to improve the range of treatment, care and support available to stroke sufferers, their families and carers.

The voluntary sector has an important role to play in the delivering of these services and to date £150k has been spent with voluntary sector organisations. Bids from the voluntary sector for service developments at a cost of a further £100k are currently being considered.

Organ Donation

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current waiting times for patients dependent on an organ donation from the NHS Organ Donor Register, broken down by type of organ donation. (AQW 3842/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Average (median) waiting times to transplant – in days

Organ	Adult	Paediatric
Kidney ¹	1110 (1079-1141)	277 (219-335)
Kidney & Pancreas ²	217 (194-240)	*
Heart ³	184 (122-246)	93** (39-147)
Lung ³	519 (443-595)	*
Liver ³	149 (135-163)	86 (64-108)

1 – based on patient registrations in the UK, 1 Jan 03 – 31 Dec 06

2 – based on patient registrations (including pancreas only) in the UK, 1 Apr 04 – 31 Mar 08,

3 – based on patient elective registrations in the UK, 1 Apr 06 – 31 Mar 09

* too few cases to provide

** based on less than 100 cases

Figures in brackets are 95% confidence intervals

These figures are for the United Kingdom and are provided by NHS Blood and Transplant

Palliative and End of Life Care

Mrs N Long asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what impact efficiency savings in the Health Service are having on the availability and level of the provision of palliative and end of life care for individuals who wish to be cared for in their own home; and whether there has been any reduction in the funding or services available to patients and their families. (AQW 3862/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Over the current CSR period, a total of £44 million has been made available to improve the range of services available to people with chronic conditions, prevent unnecessary admissions to hospital and ensure that wherever possible people with such chronic conditions can be cared for and die in their place of choice in the community.

Despite the challenges of the current financial climate, all Trusts have ensured that the efficiency savings have not affected their provision of palliative and end of life care for those who wish to be cared for at home; in fact, services are being developed and enhanced by integrated working between primary and community care teams and the voluntary care sectors.

In addition, The Palliative and End of Life Care Strategy seeks to support the Board and Trusts in the more effective deployment of existing resources against the recommendations and examples of good practice and will ensure that planning for the next CSR period will also be focused accordingly. The strategy is currently out for public consultation until 19 February and can be accessed at <http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/showconsultations?txtid=40197>

Prescription Charges

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the annual cost to his Department of the reduced prescription charges; and the projected annual cost of the abolition of the charges. (AQW 3865/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Annual figures are not available yet with regard to income following the reduction in prescription charges to £3 from 1 January 2009. It is not possible to give an accurate figure for the cost of abolition of the charges; however, prior to the reduction in charges the net annual income from prescription charges was approximately £13 million, which represented 3½% of the total drugs bill.

At present, approximately 89% of prescription items are dispensed free of charge in Northern Ireland.

Press Officers

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many press officers work in his Department. (AQW 3895/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the member to the answer provided in AQW 1754/10

Heart Operations

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients have been sent to the mainland UK or the Republic of Ireland for heart operations in each of the last three years; and what has the cost been to the Health Service in each of these years. (AQW 3900/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below shows the number of referrals from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (the only Trust that provides cardiac surgery in Northern Ireland) to Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland for heart operations in the last three years and their cost.

Number of referrals for heart surgery from Belfast HSC Trust to:	Year		
	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Great Britain or Republic of Ireland	150	250	411

Number of referrals for heart surgery from Belfast HSC Trust to:	Year		
	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Cost	£2.3m	£4.4m	£6.9m

Heart Operations

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to ensure that support staff and surgeons are available to carry out heart operations instead of sending patients to other parts of the UK or the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 3902/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Additional funding of £2.0m/£3.0m/£7.0m has been allocated for cardiovascular services in the period for 2008-09 to 2010-11. This funding has and will strengthen surgical services at the RVH. It is planned that a cumulative additional 700 cardiac surgery procedures/ cardiological interventions etc are provided by March 2011.

Plans are being developed to increase cardiac surgery capacity (physical accommodation and staffing) to cope with the ever-increasing demand, so that Northern Ireland is self-sufficient in the provision of cardiac surgery by 2012/2013. The success of these plans will of course be dependent on the availability of the necessary additional funding.

Child Abuse

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many cases of child abuse have been investigated in each parliamentary constituency in each of the last three years. (AQW 3903/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is assumed that this question refers to child protection investigations. Information on the number of child protection investigations is not available in the format requested.

Child Abuse

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many instances of reported child abuse have resulted in social workers having to attend court proceedings, in each of the last three years. (AQW 3905/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the format requested, and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the management structure of each of the Health and Social Care Trusts, including the number of people employed and their respective pay bands. (AQW 3906/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Details of the management structures are available on each of the Health and Social Care Trust's web sites. The salary information requested is contained in the Trust's Annual Report a copy of which is also available on the individual web site.

Health and Social Care Trusts: Chief Executives' Salaries

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the annual salary, or the pay band, of the Chief Executive of each Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) any bonuses they have received this financial year; and (iii) for what these bonuses were awarded. (AQW 3921/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: (i) Details of the annual salaries paid to HSC Trust Chief Executives are published in the Trust's annual reports.

(ii) The annual pay increases are set with the approval of the Department of Finance and Personnel Minister. The increase due from 1 April 2009 is still under consideration.

DEPARTMENT FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Water Charges

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to meet with NI Water to discuss the inevitable increase in water charges to farms and businesses that will arise as a direct result of the recent severe frost causing damage to metered supplies. (AQW 3794/10)

Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): NIW has advised me that customers are responsible for the maintenance and repair of private supply pipes and they are informed in writing each year that it is their responsibility to regularly check meter readings, private pipe work and supply routes, and to identify and repair any leaks immediately. This would have been particularly important during the recent freezing weather conditions.

NIW recognises that some customers may be unaware that leakage is occurring and, in specified circumstances in line with its leakage policy, will grant allowances against bills where it considers the customer has not been negligent and repairs have been carried out effectively. NIW may also offer customers a repayment agreement which will enable increased bills to be paid over an extended period.

NIW is currently reviewing its leakage policy to ensure it is fair and consistent for all customers and will consult widely with stakeholders including elected representatives, farmers representatives, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Consumer Council NI. The review is scheduled for completion by 31 March 2010.

Burst Water Main Supply Pipes, Crotlieve

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the number of burst water main supply pipes that have occurred in the Crotlieve District Electoral area during the last 6 months. (AQW 3795/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it is not responsible for the supply pipe that runs from the customer's tap to the property boundary. The supply pipe belongs to the individual property owner and responsibility for any maintenance and repair rests with them.

NIW would not hold records of bursts on private supply pipes and is therefore unable to provide the information requested.

Road Gritting

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he would consider supplying farmers with road gritting materials to be used in severe weather on rural and country roads. (AQW 3797/10)

Minister for Regional Development: One of the key outcomes of the most recent review of Roads Service's Winter Service policy, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, was that the practice of targeting the limited resources available for this service on the busier main through routes should continue.

As part of this review, the possibility of providing salt to the public, on a self help basis, during severe weather was considered. Apart from the cost implications, my Department's Roads Service also had concerns, due to health and safety considerations, about allowing the public access to operational depots, during salting activities. In addition, providing salt on such a basis could mean that scarce resources were being directed towards the salting of routes, which may not achieve the optimum benefit in terms of traffic volumes. In these circumstances, it was decided that such a service should not be provided.

As the situation has not changed significantly since the previous review was carried out, I have no plans to review this aspect of the Winter Service policy, at this time.

The Member may be aware that Roads Service does employ contractors and farmers to help remove snow from local roads, using their own equipment, in severe weather conditions.

Traffic Monitoring Exercise: New Abbey Grammar School, Newry

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 2294/10, in relation to the traffic monitoring exercise at the new Abbey Grammar School, Newry (i) how long traffic monitoring will be carried out before a report is prepared; (ii) when the results will be made public; and (iii) if the availability of finance will determine whether any road safety measure identified in the exercise will be implemented.

(AQW 3826/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I understand that traffic monitoring will be carried out by the headmaster on a monthly basis, in his role as Travel Co-ordinator on behalf of the school. My Department's Roads Service will also monitor the traffic situation. However, it should be noted that the effect on the Mourne Country roundabout, Ashgrove Road and Upper Damolly Road, cannot be fully determined until the new traffic patterns settle down and drivers have determined the most appropriate route to use on their journey to the school.

I can advise that the school will liaise closely with local residents as part of its obligations under the Travel Plan. I understand that an invitation has already been issued, from the headmaster, for residents to visit the school in the near future, at which time the results of his initial monitoring will hopefully be available.

I can confirm that the implementation of any identified road safety measures, on the adopted road network in the vicinity of the school, would be subject to the availability of finance, as is the normal case.

Easibus in Bangor

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development the number of Easibus journeys in Bangor in each of the last three years.

(AQW 3830/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Translink that 52, 284 passenger journeys were carried out by Bangor Easibus in 2006/07, 51,914 in 2007/08 and 42,800 in 2008/09.

Easibus Service

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the cost to Translink of the Easibus service; and (ii) what subsidy Translink received from his Department for this service, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 3832/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The cost to Translink in delivering the Easibus service and the subsidy provided by my Department in each of the last three financial years are set out in the table below.

	Easibus Scheme	Cost to Translink (£)	Subsidy from DRD (£)
2006/07	Bangor	136,900	37,500
	Belfast	164,200	102,800
	Derry	59,500	31,400
2007/08	Bangor	136,900	37,700
	Belfast	164,200	99,100
	Derry	61,200	33,400
2008/09	Bangor	136,900	38,400
	Belfast	163,400	83,400
	Derry	60,000	33,000

Partnership Agreement

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he has taken to maintain the partnership agreement made in 2001 between his Department and local councils. (AQW 3848/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The issue of the treatment of footways was given consideration during the most recent review of Roads Service's Winter Service policy, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly. At that time, it was recognised that the cost of salting footways was prohibitive, and that the basic logistics of providing such a service, which is largely a manual task, made it impractical to introduce.

It was proposed that, in periods of prolonged lying snow, the Department would seek to enlist the help of other agencies, such as district councils, to assist in clearing busy town centre footways. The then Minister wrote to each council, outlining proposals for partnering arrangements for the removal of snow and ice from town centre footways and pedestrian areas. Roads Service followed this up by writing to each council, explaining the proposals in detail, and enclosing a proposed model agreement.

In consultation with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, Roads Service drew up a draft legal agreement. However, only a small number of councils signed up to the agreement, and as such, the resources available to treat snow and ice on footways are somewhat limited. No further action was taken at that time. However, following the recent prolonged spell of wintry weather, I have asked the Chief Executive of Roads Service to revisit the partnering arrangements with the councils.

Gritting Schedule

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development what immediate action he is taking to include Blackskull on this winter's gritting schedule. (AQW 3864/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it is currently assessing an earlier request from a local resident, for the inclusion of Blackskull on the winter gritting schedule. I have asked Mr Bertie Ellison, Deputy Divisional Roads Manager, Roads Service Southern Division, to advise you of the outcome of the assessment, which is due in early March 2010.

Roads Service has procedures in place to provide salt bins or grit piles, for use by the public, on a self help basis, on roads that do not qualify for inclusion on the gritting schedule. Should another period of freezing weather return, drivers in the Blackskull area may use the grit piles located on the verges of Donaghcloney Road, Killysorrell Road, and on both stretches of the Blackskull Road.

A2 Road Widening Scheme

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the impact of the A2 Road Widening scheme in the vicinity of Belfast High School. (AQW 3880/10)

Minister for Regional Development: As I advised the Member in my response to his earlier Question (AQW 8607/09), the road improvement scheme proposals on the A2 at Belfast High School include a dual carriageway with a central reserve. All local access to this road will be on a left in/left out basis, that is, there will be no right turn manoeuvres from local accesses. Turning manoeuvres will be accommodated at three locations on this section of the A2 - at Shore Avenue, Shorelands and Station Road. The proposals have been considered in association with Belfast High School and include an entrance and egress onto the Carrickfergus-bound carriageway, which will be constructed to appropriate standards. The design also includes a lay-by for buses on the Belfast-bound carriageway.

My Department's Roads Service has held a series of meetings with Belfast High School, over the past 3 years, with regard to the impact of the scheme proposal on their property, accommodation works required and bus parking facilities within the school grounds. I am advised that the School representatives are satisfied with the access and accommodation works proposed.

Belfast High School made representations to the Public Inquiry held into the scheme proposals in October 2007 that a lay-by should be provided in the proposed design. This resulted in the Inspector recommending that an assessment be carried out on the provision of a lay-by. A detailed assessment was carried out by Roads Service

following the Public Inquiry and a decision, based on the findings, was taken that a lay-by for private cars would not be included in the proposal.

Full details of the 'Response to Public Inquiry Inspectors' Report' can be viewed on the Roads Service website at the following address: http://roadimprovements.roadsni.gov.uk/response_report.pdf

Proposed A5 Road Scheme

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions he has had with the Minister of Finance and Personnel regarding finance provision for the proposed A5 road. (AQW 3885/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I can advise that I have not had direct discussions with the Minister for Finance and Personnel regarding the financing of the A5 road scheme.

However, the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review provided my Department with the requested funding for this scheme in the budget period 2007-2011. The current Investment Strategy included indicative allocations for the scheme in subsequent years and also reflected the £400 million contribution from the Irish Government for the joint A5 and A8 Initiative.

I can further advise that there have been a number of meetings between senior officials in my Department and those of the Department of Finance and Personnel, along with senior officials from the Irish Government's Department of Finance and Department of Transport, in relation to the proposed scheme.

High Bangor Road: Resurfacing

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans the Roads Service has to resurface the High Bangor Road at the new water treatment plant. (AQW 3899/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that they plan to carry out resurfacing work on the High Bangor Road, Donaghadee, between the High Trees junction and the Kylestone Road.

Given the overall length of this stretch of road, and the costs involved, Roads Service intends to carry out the work in three sections. The section you have referred to at the new water treatment plant, represents the middle section to be resurfaced.

Some preparatory drainage work on the first section of road, at the Kylestone Road end, commenced recently, and a new surface should be laid before the end of the current financial year.

Roads Service intends to resurface the second section of this road, most probably the middle section at the new water treatment plant, in the 2010/11 financial year, subject to the availability of sufficient funding, and other competing priorities.

The third section of this road, at the Donaghadee end, will be considered for inclusion in the 2011/12 works programme.

Gritting and Snow Removal

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what provision Roads Service has made for (i) gritting; and (ii) snow removal for the remainder of this financial year. (AQW 3901/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it has sufficient finance, labour and materials to operate the Winter Service programme for the remainder of the 2009/2010 financial year.

I should advise the Member that Roads Service has no statutory obligation to salt roads. However, it does earmark funds to provide a salting service, aimed at helping traffic move safely and freely in wintry conditions, through the removal of snow and the gritting of the salted network across the North.

Flights Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of flights booked for Civil Servants in his Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these flights, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3908/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The number of flights booked for Civil Servants in my Department (excluding Water Service, now NI Water) which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used, and the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these flights in each of the last five years, is set out in the table below.

Year	No. Flights Cancelled/ Part Cancelled	Cost of cancelled flight & admin fees
05-06	25	£899.13
06-07	20	£1,229.38
07-08	18	£737.81
08-09	15	£1,325.85
09-10*	15	£1,098.00

* This period covers 1 April 2009 to 20 January 2010

Hotels Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of nights in hotels booked for Civil Servants in his Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these hotel rooms, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3909/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The information available from the Department's records on the number of nights in hotels booked for Civil Servants and paid for but not used, and the associated costs, is set out in the table below.

Year	(i)	(ii)	
	No. of Nights	Cost	Loss
2009-2010	1	£138.00	£138.00
2008-2009	-	-	-
2007-2008	1	£70.00	£70.00
2006-2007	-	-	-
2005-2006	-	-	-

Jubilee Road Office, Newtownards: Staffing

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development how many staff are employed in his Department's office at Jubilee Road, Newtownards (i) currently; and (ii) in each of the last three years. (AQW 3938/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it currently employs 12 staff at Jubilee Road, Newtownards and has done so in each of the last three years.

Railway: Coleraine to Londonderry Track

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development if the Coleraine to Londonderry railway track relay is to proceed as planned, and if so, what is the start date for the project. (AQW 3941/10)

Minister for Regional Development: At present, the Coleraine to Derry railway track relay is proceeding as planned. Translink are in the process of preparing an Economic Appraisal for the project which is expected to be with my Department by March 2010. Subject to approvals and available funding, the preliminary work is planned to commence in 2011.

Railway: Coleraine to Londonderry Track Signalling System

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development if the signalling system system will be modernised during any relay of the Coleraine to Londonderry railway track, and if so, what affect will this have on the signalmen employed on the line. (AQW 3947/10)

Minister for Regional Development: With the advances in technology in the field of rail operations, Translink have indicated that it is their intention to explore the feasibility of centralising signalling in the North-West into the Coleraine signal cabin following the re-lay of track between Coleraine and Derry and upgrade of the signalling system.

The design and specification of such a scheme have not yet been finalised, however staff representatives have been appraised of these long-term plans and will be kept updated through further regular in-house consultation meetings.

Gritting: North Down Area

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what was the cost to his Department of gritting the roads in the North Down area over the Christmas period. (AQW 3951/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the cost of salting the road network in the North Down area, from 23 December 2009 to 4 January 2010 inclusive, was approximately £46,000.

Industrial Tribunals

Mr D Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development how much (i) his Department; and (ii) NI Water spent on industrial tribunals (a) in each of the last three years; and (b) on each tribunal. (AQW 3952/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The table below details how much my Department and Northern Ireland Water (NIW) have spent on industrial tribunals in the years 2007/08, 2008/09 and 2009/10. It also gives details of the amount spent on each tribunal.

	Year	Number of Tribunal	Amount spent on tribunal (£)	Total spent on Industrial Tribunals in that year (£)
DRD	2007/08	0	0	0
	2008/09	1	37,353.30	37,353.30
	2009/10	0	0	0
NIW	2007/08	1	1,000	1,000
	2008/09	1	60,536	90,886
		2	16,150	
		3	2,200	
		4	1,000	
		5	1,750	
		6	9,250	
	2009/10	0	0	0

NI Water

Mr D Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to staff working within, or on behalf of, NI Water, who is responsible for (i) overseeing sickness levels; (ii) referring staff on long-term sick leave to in-house medical officers; and (iii) initiating absence related disciplinary proceedings for all (a) technicians; (b) assistant technicians; and (c) project assistants. (AQW 3954/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the technicians, assistant technicians and project assistants referred to are employed by contractors engaged by NIW under a tendered contract arrangement. NIW has no role in the Human Resources process and responsibility for matters such as sickness procedures rests with the individual employers.

NI Water

Mr D Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development who is responsible for (i) the payment of salaries; and (ii) the human resources functions in relation to (a) technicians; (b) assistant technicians; and (c) project assistants performing duties, within or on behalf of, NI Water. (AQW 3955/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the technicians, assistant technicians and project assistants referred to are employed by contractors engaged by NIW under a tendered contract arrangement. NIW has no role in the Human Resources process and responsibility for matters such as payment of salaries and the Human Resources function rests with the individual employers.

NI Water

Mr D Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development who employs (i) technicians; (ii) assistant technicians; and (iii) project assistants working within, or on behalf of, NI Water. (AQW 3956/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the technicians, assistant technicians and project assistants referred to are employed by contractors engaged by NIW under a tendered contract arrangement. The contractors involved are Williams Industrial Services, Orion Group and NI Computing.

NI Water

Mr D Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development who is responsible for setting (i) annual leave entitlements; and (ii) the annual salary review of (a) technicians; (b) assistant technicians; and (c) project assistants performing duties within or on behalf of NI Water. (AQW 3964/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the technicians, assistant technicians and project assistants referred to are employed by contractors engaged by NIW under a tendered contract arrangement. NIW has no role in the Human Resources process and responsibility for matters such as annual leave entitlements and annual salary reviews rests with the individual employers.

Enterprise Rail Link

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he has taken to ensure that the Enterprise rail link is an integral part of Northern Ireland's tourist network in 2010 and over the next five years. (AQW 3970/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department is working closely with colleagues in DETI and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) to ensure that the needs of tourism are built into our Transport Plans and Strategies within the context of current budget plans and relevant Transportation and Development Strategy.

In addition Translink have provided the following as examples of the various strategies and marketing promotions in relation to Enterprise services with an association to tourism:

- The dedicated annual budget and marketing strategy for Enterprise;

- The partnership approach with Irish Rail – including regular marketing meetings to plan future promotions and advertising to key market segments including domestic and international tourists;
- The New Eurail and InterRail All-Ireland products in conjunction with Irish Rail introduced in January 2010;
- Joint PR and marketing activity with Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau and Dublin Visitor and Convention Bureau;
- The Translink Summer Tourism Campaign for rail and bus services promotes good value travel in the North aimed at tourists and leisure day-trippers;
- The promotion of cross-border rail travel to event organisers and group travel operators;
- The “NI Breaks” product – public transport and accommodation packages in the North and targeting RoI and domestic market;
- Initial discussions for a “tourist train” pilot product on the Derry Line which would be widely promoted to the tourist market – groups and individuals;
- Translink tourism publications such as “Outings by Rail” promotes rail travel to tourist attractions across the local rail network and is available for tourists at stations and at Tourist Information Centres;
- The “Visitors” section on the Translink website provides information on rail and bus services, special offers, maps etc;
- The Tourist Information Display stands, maps and floor vinyls in Belfast Central Station (arrival point for Enterprise) provide information for passengers arriving from the South.

In addition, the two rail companies have developed a high level strategy to move towards an hourly service on the Enterprise service discussed recently at the NSMC Transport plenary. At this point an initial proposal to improve reliability of train capability is being explored but within the context of the current budget. A recent fares promotion introduced in the context of the recent re-opening of the full service remains in place.

The Square in Warrenpoint: Underground Car Park

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will consider commissioning a feasibility study in relation to providing a two or three level underground car park beneath the Square in Warrenpoint.

(AQW 3976/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I am advised by my Department’s Roads Service that, for most of the year, there is sufficient car parking capacity in Warrenpoint.

It is accepted that during the holiday months of July and August, parking would be at a premium, however, the costs associated with the construction of a two or three level car park, particularly underground, could not be justified in the current economic climate. Consequently, I will not be commissioning a feasibility study into such a project.

Newry: Proposed Southern Relief Road

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he intends to take to ensure that the proposed Newry Southern Relief Road, linking the A2 with the main Dublin-Belfast route, will feature regularly on the North South Agenda.

(AQW 3978/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I can confirm that the Newry Southern Relief Road, together with the Narrow Water Bridge Project, have been discussed regularly at meetings of the North South Ministerial Council (Transport Sector). Furthermore, my Department’s Roads Service has discussed these projects with representatives from the National Roads Authority and the Department of Transport in the South, at the Cross-Border Steering Group.

It is my intention that this dialogue will continue through these forums.

Newry: Road Signage

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will ensure that the road signage for Newry North, Newry South and Newry City Centre will be strategically sited along the new Newry By-Pass. (AQW 3979/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the direction signs to be provided on the A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue dual carriageway scheme, have been designed in accordance with the recommendations of the Traffic Signs Manual.

In this context, while "Newry North", "Newry South" and "Newry City Centre" may be local destinations within the city, they are not recognised as primary destinations. Therefore, it is not considered appropriate to use these destinations on the direction signs that are being provided on this stretch of the A1 Key Strategic, Belfast to Dublin Route.

However, I can advise the Member that "Newry" will be signed at four of the five flyover junctions on the A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue dual carriageway. At each of these junctions, there will be four large map-type signs, two on the southbound carriageway and two on the northbound carriageway. Therefore, on each carriageway there will be a direction sign at the junction indicating the appropriate destinations, including "Newry", and an advanced direction sign, located half a mile in advance of the junction. The advanced direction sign, in addition to indicating the same destinations, will also include the name of the junction in a separate panel at the top of the sign. The junction names from north to south on the scheme are "Sheepbridge", "Carnbane", "Camlough" and "Cloghogue".

Lagan Ferrovial, the Construction Contractor for this Design Build Finance and Operate project, has already erected both the direction sign, and the advanced direction sign on the southbound carriageway at Sheepbridge, and the direction sign on the northbound carriageway at Cloghogue. While the Construction Contractor provided a variable message sign as a temporary alternative to the advanced direction sign on the northbound carriageway, it was recently removed. However, Roads Service has asked for it to be reinstated, until the permanent advanced direction sign is provided.

I can also advise that, following a meeting with Newry Chamber of Commerce and Trade, including representatives from the Buttercrane and Quays shopping centres, Roads Service is currently considering their request to replace the junction names "Sheepbridge" and "Cloghogue" with "Newry North" and "Newry South" respectively.

Finally, I can confirm that only the Bernish View Point will be signed at the fifth flyover junction on the dual carriageway at Chancellors Road.

Gritting of Footpaths

Mr M McLaughlin asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail a timeline of when responsibility for the gritting of footpaths will be established. (AQW 3990/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The Member may be aware that the issue of winter service, including treatment of footways, was previously reviewed and debated by the Assembly. At that time, it was recognised that the cost of salting footways was prohibitive and that the basic logistics of introducing, what would be a largely manual task, would be impractical.

It was proposed that, in periods of prolonged lying snow, the Department would seek to enlist the help of other agencies, such as district councils, to assist in clearing busy town centre footways. The then Minister wrote to each council, outlining proposals for partnering arrangements for the removal of snow and ice from town centre footways and pedestrian areas. Roads Service followed this up by writing to each council, explaining the proposals in detail, and enclosing a proposed model agreement.

In consultation with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, Roads Service drew up a draft legal agreement. However, only a small number of councils signed up to the agreement, and as such, the resources available to treat snow and ice on footways are somewhat limited. No further action was taken at that time. However, following the recent prolonged spell of wintry weather, I have asked the Chief Executive of Roads Service to revisit these proposed partnering arrangements with councils.

Gritting of Minor Roads

Mr A McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development if he plans to review the criteria for gritting minor roads following the recent cold spell. (AQW 4002/10)

Minister for Regional Development: One of the key outcomes of the most recent review of the winter service policy and procedures operated by my Department's Roads Service, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, was that the practice of targeting the limited resources available for this service on the busier main through routes should continue.

In general, this means that Roads Service salts main through routes carrying more than 1,500 vehicles per day and, in exceptional circumstances, roads with difficult topography carrying between 1,000 and 1,500 vehicles per day. The application of this policy ensures that 28% of the total road network, which carries around 80% of traffic, is salted, at an annual cost of approximately £5 million. An extension of the salting schedule to cover 90% or 100% of traffic volumes would increase the cost to approximately £10 million or £20 million per annum, respectively.

In addition small settlements in rural areas containing 100 dwellings or more now have salted links to roads on the main salted network. Salt bins/grit piles are also provided at various locations for people to use on a "self-help" basis, and Roads Service commits significant resources to maintain approximately 3,500 salt bins provided on public roads.

Following the severe wintry conditions experienced in the North at the start of December 2008, Roads Service carried out an examination of its operational response to areas around rural schools. This resulted in Roads Service introducing enhanced communication arrangements, and priority "secondary" salting to the 46 rural schools most affected by weather conditions throughout the winter of 2008/09, and the effectiveness of this service is currently being monitored.

While I can understand and appreciate the concerns of those who use the remaining, more lightly trafficked roads which are not on the salted network, it simply is not practical to salt all roads. The North is already one of the best performers, compared to other regions across these isles, in terms of the length of road salted per head of population, and there is a fine balance to be drawn between putting even more funds into salting, or into the many other worthwhile demands on Roads Service's limited resources, many of which are also safety related.

As things have not changed significantly since the most recent review, I see little benefit in carrying out another review, at this time. However, as with all such significant weather events, Roads Service will examine the effectiveness of its response to the current occurrence, and take on board any lessons learned.

Water Meters

Mr J Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development what percentage of commercial properties have water meters installed. (AQW 4023/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it has records of 107,874 commercial properties of which 85,402 (79 percent) have water meters installed.

Newry: Beech Hill Road

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the inaccessibility of the Beech Hill Road, Newry; and to detail the timescale for its reinstatement. (AQW 4037/10)

Minister for Regional Development: As the Member will be aware, it has been necessary to place an emergency road closure on the section of the Beech Hill Road between the A1 and Lisserboy Road, due to the very poor condition of the road surface.

My Department's Roads Service has arranged for repairs to be carried out on this stretch of road, commencing on Wednesday 27 January, which will take approximately four weeks to complete.

Trees or Hedges

Mr A Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development if Roads Service has the power to insist that an individual cuts back a tree or hedge if it is sited on the corner of a road and is blocking the sight line for motorists. (AQW 4051/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Firstly, I should explain that most roadside trees and hedges are on lands adjacent to public roads, and it is the responsibility of property owners or occupiers of those lands to ensure that such trees and hedges do not endanger or obstruct road users. From time to time my Department's Roads Service places notices in local press, and in farming journals, reminding owners/occupiers of this responsibility.

Generally, overgrown trees and hedges that endanger or obstruct road users are identified by Roads Service during routine maintenance inspections. However, from time to time members of the general public would also report overgrown trees or hedges.

Initially, owners/occupiers are identified by Roads Service and are requested to remove or cut back overgrown foliage. If that fails, Roads Service has powers under Article 50 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993, to serve a notice on the owner/occupier, requiring him to remove or cut back the tree or hedge so as to remove the danger or obstruction. Where an owner/occupier does not comply with the requirements of the notice, Roads Service may carry out the necessary works and seek to recover the costs.

That said, Roads Service has no authority to insist that a landowner cut back trees or hedges, within the confines of their own property, to improve sight distance.

Roads Service Structural Maintenance

Mr T Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any plans he has to allocate the £15 million from the December Monitoring Round to Roads Service for structural maintenance. (AQW 4061/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has confirmed that, following the outcome of the December Monitoring Round, approximately £15 million has already been allocated to its Divisions.

Roads Service is well versed in dealing with end of year funding, with all Divisions having pre-determined programmes of work targeting the worst roads.

Grit Boxes

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his Department's policy on the location of grit boxes. (AQW 4079/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it has procedures in place to provide salt bins or grit piles, for use by the public, on a self help basis, on roads that do not qualify for inclusion on the gritting schedule, provided the following criteria are met:-

- the location in question must be on the publicly maintained road network;
- the gradient of the road in question must be over 5%;
- no reasonable alternative route shall be available; and
- the subject road attains a minimum overall score, derived using a specific formula, where points are awarded depending on road geometry, residential usage, community welfare and commercial usage.

In addition, new salt/grit boxes can also be provided at the roadside adjacent to schools that are regularly affected by severe wintry weather. However, new bins will not be provided unless requested by a member of the public who also agrees to spread the salt provided.

Where salt bins are provided they shall:-

- be available for use from November to March inclusive. However, if necessary they may be removed during the summer months to prevent vandalism or theft;
- be inspected regularly and refilled as necessary during the winter months; and
- normally not be provided within 100m of another bin.

Roads Service already commits significant resources to maintaining approximately 3,500 salt bins it has provided on public roads.

Bridges: Naming

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his Department's policy on the naming of bridges. (AQW 4081/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I can advise the Member that my Department has no policy on the naming of bridges.

Rural Roads

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will re-consider the possibility of enabling farmers to grit rural roads which Roads Service cannot reach in freezing weather conditions. (AQW 4087/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I would refer the Member to my previous response to his recent Assembly Question AQW 3797/10, which addresses the issue of farmers gritting rural roads.

Review of Public Administration

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) for an update on his Department's implementation of the Review of Public Administration; (ii) if he is on target to meet the March 2011 RPA saving targets; and (iii) how staffing levels have been reduced as a result of RPA. (AQW 4110/10)

Minister for Regional Development: In September 2009, the Review of Public Administration (RPA) Executive Sub-Committee endorsed the refined suite of public realm functions that will transfer to local government from my Department's Roads Service. These functions include alleygating, pedestrian permits, permitting local events on roads, off-street car parking and on-street parking enforcement.

Roads Service has advised that these functions, and potentially up to 60 of its staff, would transfer to the new councils, which are due to be created in May 2011. An agreed budget will be transferred in conjunction with the transfer of these functions.

Roads Service are continuing to take forward the key aspects of the proposed RPA reforms, including:-

- working with local government officials, to enable the agreed public realm functions to transfer to local government in May 2011. This is a challenging timetable, and a delay at any part in the process could lead to the May 2011 timescale not being achieved;
- developing a mechanism with local government officials, that will facilitate greater input by councils into the decision making process, on local roads issues. This process will be incorporated within the proposed community planning framework; and
- considering the most appropriate structural changes for Roads Service, that could be introduced to reflect the new council boundaries to become effective in May 2011.

DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Village Area of South Belfast

Ms A Lo asked the Minister for Social Development when her Department intends to honour the commitment it made at the public inquiry into the vesting of homes in the Village area of south Belfast, to release the transcript to anyone who requested a copy. (AQW 3742/10)

Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie): The Department gave no commitment to release the transcript from the recent public enquiry into the "village". Whilst the Independent Inspector who chaired the

proceedings invited interested parties to seek the transcript from the Department at the end of the Inquiry if they so wished, he had no authority to approve the release of the document which is exempt from disclosure under section 32(2) (b) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Village Area of South Belfast

Ms A Lo asked the Minister for Social Development if she could confirm that the Housing Executive is not committed to courtyard layouts for new housing in the Village area of south Belfast as described in its selected option, and that the historic street pattern in the area will be retained. (AQW 3743/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive is not committed to courtyard layouts or any other particular layout in the design of the proposed new housing in the Village. The objective is to achieve the most suitable design and housing mix, working in partnership with all interested parties – all options can be considered.

Village Area of South Belfast

Ms A Lo asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm (i) that in line with the assurances given at the public inquiry into new housing in the Village area of south Belfast, that the regeneration will be ‘community led’; (ii) that this commitment should include community representation on the Design Team; and (iii) that there will be full consultation with the community on the selection of the other members of the Design Team. (AQW 3745/10)

Minister for Social Development: Throughout the lengthy process of considering the various options for the regeneration of the Village Urban Redevelopment Area, all possible steps have been taken to engage with the various shades of opinion in the local community and to involve community representatives and residents fully at each stage of the process.

As the emphasis now moves towards consideration of the design options for the new housing, the emphasis will remain on ensuring maximum involvement of the community and their representatives. The Housing Executive has already commenced the process of setting up a Design Team which will include community representation. The Housing Executive’s District Manager has already arranged meetings with both the Greater Village Regeneration Trust and the Blackstaff Homeowners Association to consult them on the composition of the Design Team. It is not intended to place any residential restrictions on who the community chooses to represent them on the Design Team, but steps will be taken to ensure that all shades of opinion have the opportunity to be represented on the Design Team.

Village Area of South Belfast

Ms A Lo asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to new housing in the Village area of south Belfast, (i) to confirm that ‘community led’ refers to residents living in the Urban Renewal Area; and (ii) what she proposes to do to make sure the community is provided with the opportunity to work in partnership with the Housing Executive on this project. (AQW 3746/10)

Minister for Social Development: Throughout the lengthy process of considering the various options for the regeneration of the Village Urban Redevelopment Area, all possible steps have been taken to engage with the various shades of opinion in the local community and to involve community representatives and residents fully at each stage of the process.

As the emphasis now moves towards consideration of the design options for the new housing, the emphasis will remain on ensuring maximum involvement of the community and their representatives. The Housing Executive has already commenced the process of setting up a Design Team which will include community representation. The Housing Executive’s District Manager has already arranged meetings with both the Greater Village Regeneration Trust and the Blackstaff Homeowners Association to consult them on the composition of the Design Team. It is not intended to place any residential restrictions on who the community chooses to represent them on the Design Team, but steps will be taken to ensure that all shades of opinion have the opportunity to be represented on the Design Team.

Village Area of South Belfast

Ms A Lo asked the Minister for Social Development if she has any plans to allow owners of new homes in the Village area of south Belfast to pay a nominal rent between the period of vesting and acquiring a new, or refurbished house. (AQW 3748/10)

Minister for Social Development: At the date of vesting all privately owned properties within the Redevelopment Area of the Village Urban Redevelopment Area will come into Housing Executive ownership and their occupants become Housing Executive tenants.

Those dwellings which are occupied will be charged a reduced rent plus rates in respect of their dwelling to reflect that the property is situated within a Redevelopment Area.

The rent for dwellings situated within a Redevelopment Area is determined using the Housing Executive's Rent Assessment Scheme then limited to one third of the resultant charge. This charge will continue until the tenant is permanently re housed.

Nelson Street Site in North Belfast

Ms C Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development if her Department has been involved in proposals to re-zone the Nelson Street site from social housing to private housing. (AQW 3776/10)

Minister for Social Development: The draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) prepared by Planning Service has zoned the Nelson Street site for social housing. This site (along with a number of other sites within the BMAP boundary) was identified to Planning Service by the Housing Executive as part of its Housing Needs Assessment submission in 2006. The Housing Executive understands that there is no change in this status in terms of the social housing zoning.

Nelson Street Site in North Belfast

Ms C Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development if she can confirm that her intention for the Nelson Street site in north Belfast is to develop social housing for people on the north Belfast housing list. (AQW 3778/10)

Minister for Social Development: I am happy to confirm that current and projected housing need in North Belfast would certainly justify the delivery of a social housing scheme in Nelson Street or surrounding area.

Both the Housing Executive and Clanmil Housing Association remain committed to delivering such a scheme should land in the area become available.

Social Security Benefits

Mrs M O'Neill asked the Minister for Social Development what steps she has taken to ensure that changes to Social Security benefits affecting lone parents will not have a negative impact on single parents and their families. (AQW 3813/10)

Minister for Social Development: From December 2008 lone parents with older children are no longer entitled to Income Support solely on the grounds of being a lone parent. Instead lone parents who are able to take up employment may claim Jobseeker's Allowance..

The aim of the changes is to encourage and support lone parents into work because paid work is the best route out of poverty for lone parents and their families.

As with all jobseekers, in applying the changes for lone parents, Advisers will have regard to their individual circumstances. Although there are flexibilities within the current Jobseeker's Allowance scheme that would enable lone parents to comply with the changes, additional operational flexibilities and safeguards have been introduced in Northern Ireland because I recognise that there is a shortage of suitable and affordable childcare here. I must emphasise that no lone parent in Northern Ireland will be penalised where suitable or affordable childcare is not available to them.

Lone parents will also be given information, advice and guidance they need to make decisions so that they do not have to take or remain in a job that makes them worse off. An Adviser can carry out a Better off Calculation which will provide advice to the lone parent about the range of benefits they may be entitled to and to estimate how much better off that person could be in work.

I believe that the Jobseeker's Allowance framework in Northern Ireland is sufficiently flexible to ensure that the changes will not have a negative impact on lone parents.

Private Rental Housing Benefit

Mr J O'Dowd asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how many claimants there are for private rental Housing Benefit in (a) Gilford, Co Down; and (b) Laurencetown, Co. Down; and (ii) how much is paid annually in private rental Housing Benefit to claimants in (a) Gilford, Co. Down; and (b) Laurencetown, Co Down.

(AQW 3853/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive does not hold the information sought at the level requested. However the caseload and expenditure of Banbridge District Office, which manages Laurencetown and Gilford, is detailed below.

BANBRIDGE DISTRICT OFFICE

Private Housing Benefit Caseload as at 01/04/09	1061
Private Housing Benefit expenditure 2008/09	£571,701

Village Area of South Belfast

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development why new houses being build in Roden Street in the Village area of south Belfast are not available for purchase by homeowners under the scheme announced in February 2009, to allow homeowners to buy a new home without having to meet the five year qualifying period.

(AQW 3870/10)

Minister for Social Development: I plan to publish a consultation document in the coming weeks that will seek to support those owner occupiers living in redevelopment areas whose homes have to be acquired to make way for redevelopment work..

Whilst the policy has been underdevelopment for some time now, it has not yet been introduced. When published for consultation, the paper will set out our plans to re-house former owner occupiers who wish to purchase new housing put back in a redevelopment area.

Village Area of South Belfast

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development to provide information about the possibility of new houses being provided for homeowners at Maldon Street in the Village area of south Belfast. (AQW 3871/10)

Minister for Social Development: The regeneration of the Village will involve the construction of over 270 new homes alongside the refurbishment of many more. This new housing within the community should encourage those already living there to stay on post regeneration. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has supported Fold Housing Association in the proposed provision of 52 three bedroom (5 person houses) on a site at Maldon Street on a mixed tenure basis, however the scheme has yet to reach planning approval stage.

Village Area of South Belfast

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development what action she intends to take to ensure that homeowners in the Village area of south Belfast, who have their homes vested and decide to move out of the area to alternative accommodation, are able to return to one of the new houses or a refurbished house within the Urban Renewal Area. (AQW 3872/10)

Minister for Social Development: My Department is currently developing plans that will support owner occupiers in Urban Renewal Areas who wish to remain in their community post regeneration. The proposals will offer owner occupiers in such areas similar opportunities as already exist for tenants.

These proposals will be issued for formal consultation in the coming weeks.

Private Housing in the Donegall Road Area

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development if she will consider purchasing private housing in the Donegall Road area to help encourage residents to stay in the wider community. (AQW 3874/10)

Minister for Social Development: The regeneration of the Village will involve the construction of over 270 new homes alongside the refurbishment of many more. This new housing within the community should encourage those already living there to stay on post regeneration. However, if this provision does not meet the housing needs of that community, I will be happy to see other proposals brought forward in due course.

Hotels Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of nights in hotels booked for Civil Servants in her Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these hotel rooms, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3910/10)

Minister for Social Development: The table below details (i) the number of nights in hotels booked for Civil Servants in my Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these hotel rooms, in each of the last five years.

Financial Year	Number of nights in hotels	Costs and loss of revenue
2004/2005	Not available	
2005/2006	Not available	
2006/2007	Not available	
2007/2008	Not available	
2008/2009	3	£20.16

Flights Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of flights booked for Civil Servants in her Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these flights, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3911/10)

Minister for Social Development: The table below details (i) the number of flights booked for Civil Servants in my Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these flights, in each of the last five years.

Financial Year	Number of Flights	Costs and loss of revenue
2004/2005	82	£4464.47
2005/2006	169	£6909.23
2006/2007	101	£6157.44
2007/2008	109	£6892.49
2008/2009	92	£4441.69

Bloomfield Estate, Bangor

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the new heating system planned for the Bloomfield Estate, Bangor. (AQW 3925/10)

Minister for Social Development: There is currently one heating scheme in the Bloomfield area for 11 dwellings programmed to commence in January 2012. Other properties within the area which are still without oil or gas heating comprise 44 bungalows at Ballyree Drive and 27 bungalows at Balloo Road and Bloomfield Road South. These bungalows require extensive improvement works including heating and are programmed for Multi-Element Improvement works in September 2010 and March 2012 respectively. These schemes, however, are dependent on the availability of funding.

Benefit Appeals

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 3607/10, how many appeals were (i) allowed; and (ii) disallowed in the dates supplied. (AQW 3987/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is provided in the table below

Financial Year	Number of Appeals allowed	Number of Appeals Disallowed
1 April 2008 – 31 March 2009	3,218	6,959
1 April 2009 – November 2009	2,266	4,574

Illegal Monument, Strabane

Mr A Bresland asked the Minister for Social Development what action she intends to take in relation to the erection of an illegal monument on Housing Executive property at Townsend Street, Strabane. (AQW 4027/10)

Minister for Social Development: In 2006 a memorial was erected on NIHE owned land within the Townsend Street area of Strabane. This was done without the prior knowledge, agreement or involvement of the Housing Executive. The Housing Executive's local District Manager voiced general objections at that time with particular reference to the site's proximity to a local school. The Housing Executive is not aware of any objections from local residents or the wider community.

The whole issue of paramilitary memorials from whatever community is a very emotive one. Experience suggests that once in place, these are unlikely to be removed without the agreement of the local community. I am committed to supporting local communities, remove sectional symbols and focus on developing more acceptable expressions of their cultural identity. I have already placed the Shared Future ethos at the heart of all my endeavours in housing and through the Shared Neighbourhood Programme, 30 existing Housing Executive estates will also be identified as communities who want to live together, not apart.

However, the erection of this monument together with the republican memorial in Newtownbutler and the loyalist memorial in Bangor shows that we still have much more to do albeit that we have at least made a positive start.

A pilot project delivered by the Rural College Network and a Pilot Project funded by Peace III will shortly get underway in a number of areas, including Newtownbutler, and this may well offer a better long term opportunity to address the wider community cohesion issues in the community that could see a resolution to a range of issues, including memorials such as this.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Laptops for Committee Meetings

Mr A Ross asked the Assembly Commission if it has any plans to provide laptops for use in Committee meetings. (AQW 3917/10)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr R Coulter): I would refer you to the answer given to your colleague in response to AQW 7129/09. The Chairpersons' Liaison Group has given consideration to the electronic provision of committee papers and the use of computer equipment in committee rooms on a number of occasions; however, the current design of the rooms and the furniture in them has precluded progress in this area.

Suitable solutions continue to be considered, particularly in the context of the recent provision of Room 30 as a committee room with modern facilities, and the Chairpersons' Liaison Group will receive regular up-dates on the matter.

You may be interested to know that, the Information Systems Office, on behalf of the Assembly Commission has conducted a research project examining alternatives to the use of laptops.

E-books for Committee Members

Mr A Ross asked the Assembly Commission if it has any plans to issue members with e-books for Committee notes rather than paper files. (AQW 3918/10)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr R Coulter): I would refer you to the answer given to Dr McDonnell in response to AQW 3833/09 and can confirm that a pilot study of eReader technology has been undertaken in the context of considering possible options for the provision of committee papers electronically. The study involved Committee staff and a Member of the Committee for the Environment who tested the suitability of the technology for accessing committee papers before and during a committee meeting. A review of the pilot project highlighted that while the technology is of interest, there are a number of difficulties with the current commercially available equipment.

As this is an emerging technology the Information Systems Office, on behalf of the Assembly Commission, will review the suitability of devices on an ongoing basis in conjunction with the Committee Office as part of the consideration and identification of improved methods for the provision of committee papers electronically. The Commission and the Chairpersons Liaison Group will be advised of developments on an on-going basis.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 5 February 2010

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Sustainable Development

Mrs M Bradley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action she is taking on a North/South basis to ensure that the island of Ireland is at the forefront of sustainable development. (AQO 477/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness): Our draft Sustainable Development Strategy states our intention to, “continue to work with colleagues throughout these islands to deliver our sustainable development commitments”.

In this context, work being taken forward in the various workstreams within NSMC and BIC supports the aims of the overall sustainability agenda.

Officials from the Sustainable Development Unit in OFMDFM have met with colleagues from the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DEHLG) and Comhar (the Sustainable Development Council in the ROI) to discuss the approach taken by our draft Sustainable Development Strategy.

The meeting was intended to be an opportunity to familiarise official counterparts with the approach being taken to the development of the Strategy and its associated Implementation Plan and to discuss parallel developments in related areas in the respective jurisdictions.

The discussion included the respective approaches being taken to work on sustainable development indicators, the merits of mainstreaming sustainable development into government and engagement with non-government sectors.

These meetings will hopefully be supportive of mutual sharing of experience and best practice in areas and issues of joint concern.

Flights Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the number of flights booked for civil servants in their Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these flights, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3840/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Table 1 below details how much the department has spent on unused flights in each of the last five financial years, and the number of such flights:

TABLE 1

Description	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Number of unused flights	15	8	6	13	15
Costs of unused flights	£1,074	£363	£489	£1,160	£990

Community Relations Council

Lord Morrow asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) how much the Community Relations Council currently pays in whole, or part to fund local Council staff in (a) Armagh City Council; (b) Belfast City Council; (c) Derry City Council; (d) Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council; (e) Fermanagh District Council ; and (f) Omagh District Council; (ii) how many staff this involves in each area; and (iii) to outline their respective job descriptions. (AQW 4025/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Community Relations Council does not fund any posts in whole or part in these 6 council areas nor does it fund any such posts in any of the other 20 district councils.

Disability Discrimination (Transport Vehicles) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009

Mr J Shannon asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the Disability Discrimination (Transport Vehicles) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 will come into force. (AQW 4034/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Disability Discrimination (Transport Vehicles) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 (the Regulations) were made on 21 December 2009 and will come into force on 25 January 2010.

Copies of the Regulations have been placed in the Assembly Library.

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail any meetings or discussions that they, or their officials, have held with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety within the last year to discuss commitments under the Investing for Health strategy. (AQW 4234/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: Ministers or officials in OFMDFM have not had any meetings or discussions within the last year to discuss commitments under the Investing for Health strategy. We understand that a meeting at official level is being arranged by the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety in February 2010. OFMDFM will be represented at that meeting.

Biomass Incinerator at Glenavy

Mr M McLaughlin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister if the Rose Energy proposal for a biomass incinerator at Glenavy requires Executive agreement, given the cross-departmental nature of the proposal. (AQW 4470/10)

First Minister and deputy First Minister: We refer the Member to the answer provided to AQ3241/10 on 15 December 2009.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Flooding and Bad Weather

Mr A McQuillan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an estimate of the cost to the agricultural industry of the recent flooding and bad weather. (AQW 3997/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew): The extremely bad weather, including the recent flooding in Fermanagh and the more recent freezing conditions across the north of Ireland, has caused great inconvenience to people here. My thoughts are with everyone affected and my heart goes out to those in rural communities who have suffered disruption.

I do not have an estimate of the cost to the agricultural industry of the recent severe weather. However, I will be making representation to Executive colleagues, and if agreement can be reached and money found, I will direct officials to assess the damage that has been incurred.

You will also be aware of the ongoing work of the Flooding Task Force and there may be lessons to be learnt in relation to handling of severe weather conditions from this important exercise

Mountain Biking in Forests

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what she is doing to promote mountain biking in her Department's forests. (AQW 4000/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: A Strategy for the Recreational and Social Use of our Forests was launched on 1 July 2009. This contained proposals to develop the potential of our forests to deliver a wider range of recreation, sport, health and educational opportunities and to encourage more visitors to our forests. In particular, it commits Forest Service to develop partnerships with a range of public and private sector service providers in order to secure a more diverse range of facilities and attractions.

The opportunities for mountain biking in forests are being considered in conjunction with local councils and other interested parties including the National Trust and the NI Tourist Board.

My officials will continue to explore the possibilities for mountain bike trail development with stakeholders

Landfill Waste Disposal Site at Cam, Garvagh

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she is aware of planning application C/2009/0148, for a land-fill waste disposal site at Cam near Garvagh; and for her assessment of its potential impact on rural tourism given that the site is adjacent to the Ulster Way and in an area of outstanding natural beauty. (AQW 4104/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department provided comments in February 2008 to the consulting engineers who were preparing the environmental statement for the proposed planning application. The DARD response included comments on the possible effects of the landfill site on landowners with agri-environment schemes, habitats and field boundaries, as well as providing mitigation measures.

Comments were also provided to the Department of the Environment (DOE) in August 2008 with regard to the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)) Regulations (NI) 1999 which reflected the comments in DARD's response in February 2008.

As part of the planning application consultation process in mid 2009 comments were sent to DOE from DARD. These comments referred to the EIA (Forestry) Regulations (NI) 2006; animal health and welfare implications; The Plant Health Order (NI) 2006 and countryside management implications.

Approval of the application is the responsibility of the Department of the Environment and therefore within the stewardship of Minister Poots. I trust that the comments made by my Department will be considered as part of the planning application process.

It would be premature to be considering raising concerns until the outcome of the application is known. However I do want to confirm that I believe Rural Tourism to be key to the sustainability of rural communities, which is why the Rural Development Programme contains a measure to encourage tourism with a budget of £15m.

Cold Weather Hardship Payment

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when proposals for a cold weather hardship payment will be brought to the Executive. (AQW 4115/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There are currently no proposals for a cold weather hardship payment. However, I intend to make early representations to Executive colleagues and if agreement can be reached and money found, I will then direct officials to assess the damage and resulting loss from the cold weather, with a view to considering hardship payments.

Cold Weather Hardship Payment

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what representations she has made to (i) DEFRA; and (ii) Europe, in respect of a cold weather hardship payment. (AQW 4116/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As you are aware there are no financial support measures available for farmers and my Department is currently facing significant resource pressures across the board.

I have not made any representations to Defra, or Europe in respect of a cold weather hardship payment.

I have however considered all avenues for financial support from Europe, including State Aid and the European Union Solidarity Fund (EUSF), but these are not feasible in the circumstances.

I do however intend to make representations to Executive colleagues, and if agreement is reached and money found, I will direct my officials to assess the damage and resulting financial loss from the bad weather, with a view to considering hardship payments.

Cold Weather Hardship Payment

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will publish all the data collected and sent to DEFRA on proposed cold weather hardship payments. (AQW 4117/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As you are aware I have indicated that I intend to make early representations to Executive colleagues, and if agreement is reached and money found, I will then direct my officials to assess the damage and resulting financial loss suffered by farmers following the recent severe weather conditions, with a view to considering hardship payments. Accordingly no data has been collected at this time, nor has any representation been made to Defra on the matter.

Axis 3 Funding

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many projects have applied for funding from Axis 3 to date; and how much money is currently available directly from her Department for these projects. (AQW 4146/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Axis 3 of the RDP is being delivered on behalf of my Department by seven Joint Council Committees (JCC's), each in partnership with a Local Action Group (LAG). As part of the delivery arrangements each JCC has agreed an implementation plan for their individual local development strategy which includes an integral financial plan.

To date all JCC's have opened calls for applications under most measures and have received, in total 1961 applications. Not all of these applications will be successful nor are they all for projects likely to be completed within this financial year.

Presently the Financial Expenditure tables in the Implementation Plans agreed with the JCC's amount to a figure in the region of £5.5m and I have resources available to meet this figure should all JCC's achieve their investment targets.

Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowances

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has considered the early payment of the Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowances. (AQW 4149/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Recognising these tough economic times, and the long-term difficulties and disadvantages faced by those farming in the hills, I am doing all possible to enable the early payment of the allowance for a second successive year.

Also, I have increased this year's payment rates. This reflects the current strength of the Euro and maintains the current double rate paid for our most severely disadvantaged areas.

The payment process for LFACA 2010 should begin in February and it will be worth an estimated £25m to the local economy

Theft of Cattle

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the investigation into the theft of cattle under the control of DARD officials in October 2009, including an expected completion date for the investigation; and if its findings will be made public. (AQW 4158/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The PSNI investigation into this incident is ongoing. The Department is co-operating with them and no further comment can be made at this time.

The expected date of completion and whether the findings are made public are matters for the PSNI to decide upon.

February Monitoring Round

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if her Department will be making bids for additional funding in the February monitoring round. (AQW 4194/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: In the final monitoring round for this current year we propose to submit one bid for £1.3m in relation to CAP disallowance.

New Entrants Scheme

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the cost of the New Entrants Scheme to date; and the number of applicants to the scheme. (AQW 4200/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Since the New Entrants Scheme opened in June 2005 to date, £1,066,486 has been paid out to cover interest payments on loans made by farmers.

There have been 432 applicants to the Scheme

Organic Farming Industry

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the state of the organic farming industry; and what effect the economic downturn has had on the production and consumption of organic foodstuffs. (AQW 4217/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The organic food market is under pressure as a result of the current economic downturn. Local organic producers have reported that the market for organic food has declined, with some consumers more reluctant to travel to farm shops and other organic outlets for specific purchases.

In terms of production, very few farmers who operate to organic standards have ceased organic production. There is a core of dedicated organic food consumers who remain loyal to buying organic produce. Although the premium for organic beef has dropped, across the range the premium received for organic produce has generally remained in place.

While the organic market has slowed I recognise that organic farmers remain committed to developing their business. My Department also remains committed to the sector and continues to provide support through the Organic Farming Scheme and the NI Countryside Management Scheme.

Agricultural Land Farmed Organically

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the percentage; and (ii) the acreage, of agricultural land that is currently farmed organically; and how these figures compare to 2000. (AQW 4218/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: (i) Approximately 1.2% or (ii) 11,937 hectares of agricultural land is currently certified as farmed organically or is in the process of converting to organic certification.

These figures are more than three times greater than in the year 2000. Then, approximately 0.3% or 3,257 hectares of agricultural land was certified as farmed organically or was in the process of converting to organic certification.

Forest and Woodland

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for the current total hectares of forest and woodland; and how much of the proposed 1650 hectare increase targeted in the Programme for Government has been met. (AQW 4219/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The total area of forest and woodland in the north of Ireland at the end of March 2009 was estimated to be 86, 600 hectares (to the nearest 100 hectares).

426 hectares of the proposed 1650 hectares of new woodland targeted in the Programme for Government has been planted up to the end of December 2009.

European Fisheries Fund

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much European Fisheries Fund money will be allocated to (i) the Portavogie area; (ii) the Ardglass area; and (iii) the Kilkeel area. (AQW 4220/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: It is not possible to say how much money will be allocated to particular areas. Most European Fisheries Fund (EFF) grant opportunities are available to individual businesses and the location of these businesses is not a factor in deciding whether grant is offered. There would be an element of “area based” investment in the “Ports, Landing Sites and Shelters” measure of the EFF. The investment priorities for the 3 fishing ports which the NI Fishery Harbour Authority owns are contained in the draft EFF Investment Plan. Similarly, Axis 4 of the EFF which covers investments for the “sustainable development of fisheries areas” will deliver projects based on a strategy devised by a Fisheries Local Action Group (FLAG).

Axis 4 will be opened later this year following the completion of an independent evaluation of the South Down Taskforce Programme and the setting up the FLAG to develop the strategy.

Swamp Fever

Mr W Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, given that DEFRA has confirmed that two horses have tested positive for swamp fever in Wiltshire, what steps she is taking to protect the equestrian sector. (AQW 4272/10)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: On 19 January my Department were made aware by Defra colleagues of the confirmation of Equine Infectious Anaemia or ‘Swamp Fever’ in two horses imported from Romania via Belgium into the Wiltshire area.

Following notification from Defra, my Department notified equine stakeholders and private veterinarians of the situation. DARD portal staff were instructed to check for any imports of horses arriving from Romania and my Department undertook a check which established that there have been no recent imports of horses from Romania. The DARD website was also updated to provide a link to information produced by Defra relating to this case.

An EIA Code of Practice, produced as a result of the EIA outbreaks in the south of Ireland in 2006 is available on the DARD website. The Code of Practice provides background information on EIA and the consequences of infection. It also provides advice to those in the industry on precautionary measures that should be taken to minimise the risk of possible infection.

My officials remain in close contact with Defra and we will continue to monitor the situation to ensure that the risk to the equine sector in the north of Ireland is minimised.

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Sport NI and Central Procurement Directorate

Mr D McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to address the concerns of small and medium sized businesses who are unable to meet the procurement requirements stipulated by Sport NI and Central Procurement Directorate in relation to the awarding of contracts. (AQW 4055/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr N McCausland): Sport NI, as with all public sector bodies and Government Departments in Northern Ireland, is required, in accordance with the Northern Ireland Executive's Public Procurement Policy, to use Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) as its procurement service provider. Issues regarding the application of the Public Procurement Policy through CPD are a matter for the Minister for Finance and Personnel.

I have been informed by the Minister for Finance and Personnel that CPD recognises that the majority of businesses in Northern Ireland are Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs).

Furthermore, he has informed me that, in response to the economic downturn, he established a Construction Industry Forum for Northern Ireland (CIFNI) – Procurement Task Group. The Task Group reported in April 2009 and a number of the actions set out in its report are specifically aimed at maximizing opportunities for SMEs

Following the publication of the Task Group Report, CPD and the Centres of Procurement Expertise (CoPEs) engaged with the Construction Industry Group to develop proposals on how the pre-qualification process could be standardized and streamlined.

The proposals emerging from these working groups have been incorporated into a standard prequalification questionnaire (PQQ) template to be used to shortlist firms for invitation to tender. The Construction Industry Group was consulted on the template and generally positive feedback was received by CPD. It is anticipated that, subject to final agreement, the standard PQQ will be introduced for use by all CoPEs from 1 March 2010.

The standard PQQ includes proportionate minimum standards for financial standing for individual firms and accommodates applications from smaller enterprises to come together as consortia to bid for government contracts.

Book Prescriptions

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 3506/10, how many book prescriptions have been issued by GPs in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4174/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The number of book prescriptions that have been issued by GP's in each of the last 3 years is;

2007*	2008*	2009
278 books issued	1195 books issued	1673 books issued

* Partial figures – these do not include prescriptions prior to mid 2008 for the former SEELB Board area which are not available.

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail any meetings or discussions that he, or his officials, have held with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety within the last year to discuss commitments under the Investing for Health strategy. (AQW 4232/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) has, within the last year, had on-going meetings and discussions with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) in relation to commitments under the Investing for Health strategy. These discussions have taken place in the context of meetings of DHSSPS's Obesity Prevention Steering Group which was set up in 2008 in response to the Fit Future's Task Force Report published in 2006.

Papers Referred to the Executive

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list the subject matter of each of the 12 papers that his Department referred to the Executive between May 2007 and 7 December 2009; and to state whether the Executive agreed each paper. (AQW 4269/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It is not the practice to disclose details of Executive business. The content of Executive papers and all aspects of Executive business are confidential.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Every School a Good School - The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to provide details of ‘The inconsistency and delay in assessment, statementing and provision practices across the five Education and Library Boards’ as alluded to in the policy proposals consultation document ‘Every School a Good School - The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion’. (AQW 3882/10)

Minister of Education (Ms C Ruane): Each Education and Library Board (ELBs) has regard to the guidance contained in the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs, issued by the Department of Education (DE) in 1998. While each Board is working within the common Special Educational Needs (SEN) Framework, detailed within the Code of Practice, it is widely recognised, however, that a number of differing practices in relation to statutory and non-statutory assessment, statementing and provision have become inculcated in the practices across the 5 ELBs.

Léirítear é seo trí réimse eolais, mar shampla, ar líon na bpáistí a fuair dearbhuithe oideachais speisialta, ar líon na npáistí atá ag fanacht ar mheasúnú ar riachtanais speisialta, agus ar na meánamanna feithimh chun measúnú a fháil ó shíceolaí oideachasúil ag Céim 3 den Chód Cleachtais. Léiríonn an t-eolas seo a leanas, a soláthraíodh ag Príomhfheidhmeannaigh de na 5 Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, cuid den fhianaise seo.

This is evidenced by a range of information, for example, in the number of children who have received statements of special education, those who are currently awaiting an assessment of special needs and the average waiting times for an assessment by an educational psychologist at stage 3 of the Code of Practice. The following information, provided by the Chief Executives of the 5 Education and Library Boards, demonstrates some of this evidence.

The number of children who have received statements of special educational need in the 2008/09 academic year:-

BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB
451	280	335	342	200

The above figures refer to children and young people who received final statements of special education need. They do not include those who may have received reviewed statements.

The number of children who are currently awaiting an assessment of special needs as at December 2009:-

BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB
206	579	361	382	367

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, pre-school and examination arrangements.

The average waiting times for an assessment by an educational psychologist at Stage 3 (non-statutory assessment) of the COP, at December 2009:-

BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB
41 days	70 days	136 days (195 if only school age)	56 days	50 days

With regard to the average waiting time for a statutory assessment, 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 recognition that certain differences had developed over a period of time in relation to the criteria for initiating a statutory assessment of a child's special educational need, the ELBs introduced the 'Provisional Criteria for Initiating Statutory Assessments of Special Educational Need and for Making Statements of Special Educational Need'. This document, which will be fully implemented across all 5 Boards from September 2009, describes in detail the common criteria to be applied by Boards when considering requests to make a statutory assessment for children with SENs.

You will note that the above figures vary greatly across the Education and Library Boards. This was part of the evidence which was considered by the SEN and Inclusion Review and which raised awareness of the variations in special educational provision that has evolved over a period of time across the ELBs. A five Board Working Group is scoping the extent of the variations in relation to the type of provision at stages 3 and 5 of the Code of Practice, the expenditure per Board on each area of SEN and the type of support offered.

Within the context of the SEN and Inclusion Review the above figures also provided an indication that many children face lengthy delays before they receive appropriate in-school provision or before they reach the stage where a statutory assessment of their needs can be undertaken by an Education and Library Board. This delay is unacceptable and the Review proposals aim to enable more mainstream schools to meet the special educational needs of the majority of SEN pupils from within their own resources and through advice available to them from a range of professionals.

Key tenets of the Review proposals are for early identification of pupils' needs, followed by appropriate early intervention to reduce the barriers to learning. The introduction of a Co-ordinated Support Plan - CSP for children and young people with complex or multiple needs or a Personal Learning Plan for all other SEN children will ensure that a child's special educational needs are being met.

Flights Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of flights booked for Civil Servants in her Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these flights, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3965/10)

Minister of Education: Chuir mo Roinn ceithre eitilt in áirithe le haghaidh Státseirbhíseach le linn na bliana gnó 2009/10 ar íocadh astu go hiomlán, nó go páirteach, ach nár úsáideadh. Ba é an costas agus an cailleadh ioncaim ná £484.41a tabhaíodh nuair a cuireadh na n-eitiltí seo in áirithe. Ní raibh aon eitilt neamhúsáidte sna ceithre bliana roimhe seo.

My Department booked four flights for Civil Servants during the 2009/10 business year which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used. The costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these flights amounted to £484.41. There were no other unused flights booked in the previous four years.

Hotels Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of nights in hotels booked for Civil Servants in her Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these hotel rooms, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3966/10)

Minister of Education: Níor chuir mo Roinn aon fhanacht thar óiche in áirithe le haghaidh Státseirbhíseach i ngach bliain de na cúig bliana a chuaigh thart ar íocadh astu go hiomlán, nó go páirteach, ach nár úsáideadh agus, mar sin de, níor tabhaíodh aon chostais ná cailleadh ioncaim nuair a cuireadh na seomraí óstáin seo in áirithe.

My Department booked no nights in hotels for Civil Servants in each of the last five years which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used and therefore there were no costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these hotel rooms.

Bunscoil, Ballymena

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Education what action her Department has taken in relation to the possible opening of a bunscoil in Ballymena this year. (AQW 3971/10)

Minister of Education: Any significant change to the schools' estate, such as the establishment of a grant-maintained school, requires the publication of a statutory Development Proposal. On 26 November 2009, the North Eastern Education and Library Board published Development Proposal No. 250, which proposes the establishment of a grant-aided, Irish-medium primary school in Ballymena to be known as Gaelscoil Choin Rí Uladh, with effect from 1 September 2010, or as soon as possible thereafter.

Chríochnaigh an tréimhse reachtúil chomhairlithe de dhá mhí ar an togra ar 26 Eanáir 2010. Déanfaidh mé cinneadh ar an togra, ag cur san áireamh gach ceann de na saincheisteanna ábhartha agus tuairimí a fuarthas chomh luath agus is féidir. Mar is eol duit, ní féidir liom tráchtadh ar aon togra sula ndéanfaidh mé mo chinneadh.

The statutory two-month consultation period on the proposal ended on 26 January 2010. I will make a decision on the proposal, taking account of all the pertinent issues and the comments received as soon as possible. You will appreciate, I cannot comment on any proposals in advance of my decision.

Literacy and Numeracy

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Education, in light of her answer to the Assembly on 18 January 2010 regarding the focus on literacy and numeracy, to detail all (i) actions; (ii) meetings; and (iii) decisions taken by her in relation to this. (AQW 4038/10)

Minister of Education: Upon becoming Minister I decided to make it a priority to tackle underachievement and promote the raising of standards in literacy and numeracy.

That was the focus of my meeting (13th January 2010) with the Literacy & Numeracy Taskforce, which I appointed in February 2008, and also of North-South Ministerial Council meetings in education sectoral format (held on 14th November 2007, 28th May 2008, 10th December 2008, 20th May 2009, and 25th November 2009).

Research on the impact of selection shows that preparing children for the transfer tests distorted the curriculum and required teachers to adopt a narrow repertoire of teaching strategies, rather than fully developing literacy and numeracy through more engaging approaches. Pupils not entered for the tests received unequal or less attention than transfer test pupils and some children had classroom experiences that not only failed to meet their needs as learners but left them uninterested, demotivated and misunderstood as learners. I therefore introduced Transfer 2010 to help put an end to the detrimental effects of the tests on pupils' literacy and numeracy.

I issued a draft literacy and numeracy strategy for consultation from June to November 2008 and will shortly publish a revised strategy. A complementary strategy for literacy and numeracy in the Irish medium sector is also nearing completion. In 2009/10, I allocated £4.9m to support the Boards' regional literacy and numeracy action plan, which is in addition to the delegated funding provided to schools and the core funding provided to the Education and Library Boards.

Tá na bearta seo mar chuid de bheartas foriomlán de pholasaithe bainteacha atá á chur i bhfeidhm agam – Gach Scoil ina Scoil Mhaith, Aistriú 2010, an tAthbhreithniú ar Riachtanais Speisialta Oideachais & Chuimsiú, an tÚdarás um Oideachas agus Scileanna, straitéis na luathbhlianta, Achieving Belfast & Derry – agus tá sé mar aidhm acu ar fad torthaí a fheabhsú do na daoine óga agus a chinntiú go bhfágann siad scoil leis na scileanna litearthachta agus uimhearthachta atá de dhíth orthu.

These actions are part of the jigsaw of inter-connected policies I am putting in place – Every School a Good School, Transfer 2010, the SEN & Inclusion Review, ESA, the early years strategy, Achieving Belfast & Derry – all of which are aimed at improving outcomes for our young people and making sure they leave school with the literacy and numeracy skills they need.

Appointments to Boards of Governors

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Education what steps her Department has taken to confirm departmental appointments to the Boards of Governors of (i) voluntary grammar schools; and (ii) controlled grammar schools. (AQW 4039/10)

Minister of Education: Athbhunaítear Boird Ghobharnóirí Scoile gach ceithre bliana. Tá dátaí difriúla le haghaidh athbhunaithe sna scoileanna deonacha gramadaí agus tá formhór na scoileanna sceidealta le hathbhunú a chríochnú go luath i mbliana. Tá mo Roinn ag leanúint d'iarraíais agus de cheapacháin Roinne ar scoileanna deonacha gramadaí a phróiseáil mar chuid den chleachtadh atá faoi bhealach.

School Board of Governors are reconstituted every four years. There are different dates for reconstitution across the voluntary grammar schools with most of the schools due to complete reconstitution early this year. My Department is continuing to process applications and Departmental appointments to voluntary grammar schools as part of the on-going exercise.

My Department is also in the process of finalising nominations to the Education and Library Boards for the 17 controlled grammar schools. All controlled grammar schools are currently being reconstituted.

While some governors remain to be appointed due to vetting and other procedures, meetings of Boards of Governors can take place and business conducted so long as the meetings are quorate and any new governors have been vetted.

Middletown Centre for Autism

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Education how many (i) children; and (ii) parents have been directly assisted by Middletown Centre for Autism. (AQW 4040/10)

Minister of Education: Thug an tIonad traenáil do níos mó ná 2,300 duine go dtí seo. Soláthraíodh traenáil atá saincheaptha go speisialta i leith tuismitheoirí do 88 tuismitheoir ag an Ionad go dtí seo. Sholáthar an tIonad comhairle agus eolas do 30 tuismitheoir fosta a rinne teagmháil díreach leis an Ionad le haghaidh eolais. Déanfaidh an tIonad traenáil eisiach i leith tuismitheoirí fud fad thuaisceart na hÉireann idir mí Aibreáin agus Mí an Mheithimh i mbliana a mbeidh cúig sheisiún traenála dhá uaire atá ábharthach do thuismitheoirí iontu.

The Centre has to date delivered training to over 2,300 individuals. Training tailored specifically to parents has been delivered by the Centre to 88 parents to date. The Centre has also provided advice and information to 30 parents who have contacted the Centre directly for information. The Centre will also undertake extensive parent training across the north of Ireland between April and June this year consisting of five two-hour training sessions on topics of particular relevance to parents.

The two key services to be provided by the Centre that involve the referral of children and young people with autistic spectrum disorders are the Educational Assessment Service and the Learning Support Service. It is planned that an interim Advice and Guidance Service will commence provision directly to children in February 2010 and that the Learning Support Service will commence upon completion of the building programme.

Transitional Education and Library Boards

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Education if all of the statistics in Annex A of her Ministerial Statement of 1 December 2009 were accurate in relation to the membership of transitional Education and Library Boards; and if not, what steps she has taken to rectify any inaccuracies. (AQW 4044/10)

Minister of Education: I mo ráiteas ar 1 Nollaig mhínigh mé go raibh sé de rún agam ballraíocht na mbord a laghdú go suntasach. Bhreithnigh mé na barúlacha a tugadh i dtaca leis na Boird ó shin agus bheartaigh mé líon na mball ar dhá cheann de na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne a mhéadú- Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne Bhéal Feirste (le beirt) agus Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair (le duine amháin). Mar gheall ar na leasuithe seo, is é líon na mBall ar fad ar na ceithre Bhord ná 63 agus tá próisis roghnaithe agus cheapachán faoi shiúl. Tá sonraí leagtha amach sa tábla thíos ar líon na mball i ngach bord.

In my Statement on 1 December I explained my intention to reduce significantly membership of the Boards. Since that I have considered comments raised in regard to the Boards and, decided to increase the number of members in two of the Education and Library Boards - the Belfast (by two) and Western (by one). As a result of

these amendments the overall membership across the four Boards is 63 and selection and appointment processes to fill these posts are now underway. Details of the numbers in respect of each Board are set out in the table below.

Board	BELB	NEELB	SELB	WELB	Total
Councillors	4	9	6	5	24
Transferors & Trustees	4*	6	4	4*	18
Others	4	8	5	4	21
Total	12	23	15	13	63

* increased from Statement of 1 December 2009

Castle Towers Special School, Ballymena

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Education for an update on the proposals for the new Castle Towers Special School in Ballymena. (AQW 4063/10)

Minister of Education: Cuireadh Breithmheas Eacnamaíochta athbhreithnithe nuashonraithe i leith Scoil Speisialta Thúr Caisleáin faoi bhráid na Roinne le haghaidh faofa.

A revised and updated Economic Appraisal for Castle Tower Special School has been submitted to the Department for approval.

Every School a Good School - The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion

Mr F Cobain asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the projected cost of implementing the policy proposals outlined in the consultation document 'Every School a Good School - The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion'; and (ii) where any additional funding will come from, particularly for teacher training. (AQW 4066/10)

Minister of Education: The proposals outlined in the consultation document are at a high level at this stage of development. The formal consultation period closed on 31 January 2010 and detailed work will now begin to consider the responses. It will therefore be some months before an analysis of the responses can be made. This analysis will then enable me to consider which proposals are to be taken forward. It will be at that stage that work to project costs will be completed.

Any additional funding that may be required will be considered within the context of the spending round for the period 2011/12 to 2013/14.

Meastar go mbeidh costais thart fã £25m a bhaineann leis an túscheim acmhainn an phobail a fhorbairt, atá fíor-thábhachtach do sholáthar na dtograí ón Athbhreithniú, agus breithneofar forail le haghaidh seo i gcomhthéacs an leithdháilte iomláin don Roinn Oideachais.

Costs associated with the initial capacity-building phase, which is critical to the delivery of the proposals from the review, have been estimated to be in the region of £25m and provision for this will be considered in the context of the overall allocation for the Department of Education.

Programme for International Student Assessment

Mr J McCallister asked the Minister of Education how Northern Ireland ranked in the most recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 'Programme for International Student Assessment' in (i) scientific literacy; (ii) reading literacy; and (iii) mathematical literacy. (AQW 4067/10)

Minister of Education: The information below is taken from the 2006 PISA survey of the educational achievement of 15 year olds in the OECD.

Bhí an meánscore san eolaíocht i dtuaisceart na hÉireann níos airde ná meánscore na hEagraíochta um Chomhar agus Fhorbairt Eacnamaíochta (OECD). Bhí an meánscore sa léitheoireacht beagán thar meánscore an OECD,

cé nach raibh an difríocht seo suntasach ó thaobh staitistice de. Mar an gcéanna, ní raibh an meánscore sa mhataimaitic go suntasach difriúil ó mheánscore an OECD.

The average score for science in the north of Ireland was higher than the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average. The average score for reading was slightly above the OECD average, though this difference was not statistically significant. Similarly, the average score for mathematics here was not significantly different from the OECD average.

I am not content for achievement in the north to be 'average'. I believe that we should create a world class system that provides excellence for all our young people. I am therefore putting in place a range of interconnected policies all with the aim of raising standards, including Every School a Good School, Transfer 2010, the SEN & Inclusion Review, the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority and the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy

Boards of Governors

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Education how many schools have had their Boards of Governors reconstituted in each of the last three years; and how many are currently awaiting reconstitution. (AQW 4084/10)

Minister of Education: Four schools were reconstituted during 2007 and three during 2008.

The Education and Library Boards (ELBs) are not yet in a position to provide figures for 2009. There were 1,202 schools undergoing reconstitution during 2009. Reconstitution involves a number of stages and therefore can take some time to complete. The stages can include the following: advertisement and recruitment processes for governors; the election of teacher and parent representatives by schools; consultation where required with bodies entitled to nominate, including ELBs, Trustees and the department; election of Transferor representatives from contributory primary schools in the case of controlled post primary schools; and vetting of all new governors before formal appointment.

D'iarr an Roinn nuashonrú a fháil ó na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne maidir leis an chéim a bhain an t-athbhunú amach do na scoileanna rialaithe agus do na scoileanna faoi chothabháil. Scríobhfaidh mé chugat chomh luath agus a chuirfear an t-eolas ar fáil.

The Department has sought an update from the ELBs regarding the stage at which reconstitution has reached for the controlled and maintained schools. I will write to you as soon as the information is available.

Interactive Computerised Assessment System

Mr P McGlone asked the Minister of Education what discussions have been held within her Department regarding the continued use of the Interactive Computerised Assessment System in schools to identify dyslexia. (AQW 4086/10)

Minister of Education: Níor coinneáladh aon díospóireacht laistigh de mo Roinn i dtaca le húsáid Chóras Measúnachta Ríomhairithe Idirghníomhach (InCAS) ar scoileanna le disléicse a aithint.

No discussions have been held within my Department regarding the use of the Interactive Computerised Assessment System (InCAS) in schools to identify dyslexia.

INCAS is an adaptive assessment tool which is designed to provide a profile of a child's strengths and areas for improvement in Reading and General Maths, which can inform action. The feedback provided by InCAS may indicate where a child has difficulty with specific aspects of literacy acquisition, such as word decoding or word recognition. If optional units are used, further information about a child's spelling, vocabulary acquisition, non-verbal ability, mental arithmetic and attitudes is also available, adding to a broader picture. In this sense, it is a diagnostic tool.

However, INCAS is neither designed nor intended as a single tool for formal identification of a learning difficulty, such as dyslexia, for statementing purposes.

Identification in this sense is the role of the educational psychologist, who will use a range of assessments and observations.

Staff Disciplined for Alcohol Consumption at Work

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Education how many (i) teachers; (ii) support staff; and (iii) non-teaching staff have been disciplined for alcohol consumption at work, and/or other alcohol related infringements in each of the last five years; and what sanctions were imposed on these individuals, broken down by Education and Library Board. (AQW 4103/10)

Minister of Education: The Department of Education does not hold the requested information.

The Principal and Board of Governors of each school are responsible for the management of the school including the operation of its disciplinary procedures. School-based staff employed by Boards of Governors may be subject to disciplinary action short of dismissal without reference to the employing authority. It is only when a member of staff is being dismissed that the employing authority must be informed. Therefore not all employing authorities hold the requested information.

Those employing authorities that do hold information have indicated that in total five members of staff (none of whom were teachers) have been disciplined for alcohol consumption at work and/or other alcohol related infringements during the last five years. The sanctions imposed on these individuals have included the issue of written warnings, final written warnings and dismissal.

Níl mé in ann miondealú de réir ceantair Bhoird a sholáthar, mar gurbh é sin ba chúis le duine a aithint nó eolais phearsanta a nochtadh, a sháródh an chéad phrionsabal den Acht um Chosaint Sonraí 1998, eadhon próiseáil chothrom agus dleathach.

I am unable to provide a breakdown by Board area, as to do so could lead to the identity of an individual and disclosure of sensitive personal information which would contravene the first principle of the Data Protection Act 1998, namely fair and lawful processing.

Schools Closed During the Recent Cold Weather

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the total number of (a) primary schools; and (b) secondary schools which closed during the recent cold weather; (ii) the names of these schools; and (iii) for how long each school was closed. (AQW 4127/10)

Minister of Education: Cuireadh in iúl dom ag Príomhfheidhmeannaigh na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne gur druidim 140 bunscoil agus 19 meánscoil le linn na haimsire fuair le déanaí. Cuireadh táblaí a liostaíonn ainmneacha na scoileanna agus fad na ndruidimí i Leabharlann an Tionóil.

I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that 140 primary schools and 19 secondary schools closed during the recent cold weather.

Tables listing the school names and the duration of the closures have been placed in the Assembly Library.

Capital Build Budget

Mr P Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the level of the capital build budget for her Department for 2010/11; and the reduction in this budget as a result of the Executive capital expenditure reductions. (AQW 4164/10)

Minister of Education: Ba é leithdháileadh ollchaipitil an bhuiséid don bhliain 2010/11 ar a aontaíodh sa Bhuiséad 2007 ná £212.6 milliún. I dteannta le clár caipitil thógáil scoile, cuimsíonn an buiséad seo gach gné de chaiteachas caipitil, lena n-áirítear foráil do bhuiséid i leith Iompar Scoile, na hEarnála don Ógra agus Luath-Bhlianta.

The gross capital budget allocation for 2010/11 set at the outcome of the Budget 2007 was £212.6 million. In addition to the school capital building programme, this budget covers all aspects of capital spend including provision for Schools' Transport, Youth Sector and Early Years budgets. The announcement of £22million cuts to the capital budget reduces this figure to £190.6 million.

Emotional Well-being of Pupils

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Education if she has a strategy to promote emotional well-being in (a) primary schools; and (b) post-primary schools; and (ii) if any research has been carried out on behalf of her Department into the effect of emotional well-being on academic performance. (AQW 4198/10)

Minister of Education: Tá mo Roinn ag forbairt Cláir um Fholláine agus Leas Mothúchán na nDaltaí a bheidh dírithe i dtosach ar an earnáil iarbhunoidreachais. Tabharfaidh sé le chéile an réimse imeachtaí atá á ndéanamh ar leibhéal scoile agus soláthróidh sé comhsheasmhacht sholáthair agus infhaighteachta ar fud na hearnála oidreachais.

My Department is currently developing a Pupils' Emotional Health and Well-Being Programme with a focus, initially, on the post primary sector. It will bring together the range of activities already occurring at school level and provide a consistency of delivery and availability across the education sector.

Five working groups, made up with members with a very wide range of experience and expertise drawn from the education sector, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and a number of voluntary organisations with a focus on mental health and wellbeing are taking this work forward.

The working groups have been tasked with taking forward the development of specific aspects of the Programme, as follows:

- **Group 1 - Self Assessment for Schools:** to develop a shared understanding of what “pupils’ emotional health and wellbeing” means. To devise a tool(s) to help schools assess how they promote pupils’ emotional health and wellbeing and how this might be improved.
- **Group 2 - Training and Support for Teachers and Others:** to identify the immediate training / assistance requirements of schools’ covering the range from awareness through to specific skills. To prepare a commissioning brief for any identified training / or materials for teachers and other schools’ staff.
- **Group 3 - Good Practice Identification and Dissemination:** to identify evidenced based best practice, both here and in other jurisdictions, and prepare a plan on how this might be shared with schools.
- **Group 4 – Mapping Available Resources:** to identify evidenced based best practice, both here and in other jurisdictions, and prepare a plan on how this might be shared with schools.
- **Group 5 - Critical Incidents Response:** to update of the current guidance on suicide and self harm and to develop proposals for a regional approach to the management of critical incidents.

The outcomes from much of this work will be available over the course of 2010/11 and will be shared with schools in due course.

There is already a considerable volume of research evidence about the negative impact of poor mental health on the life chances of both adults and children and the links with social disadvantage. Further the members of the working groups have brought their experience, knowledge and expertise of the effect of emotional well-being on academic performance to the task. It is expected that the Programme, once established will make a significant contribution to the wider strategies around improving mental health in our community.

Promotion of Emotional Well-being in the Classroom

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister of Education (i) how the promotion of emotional well-being is integrated into the curriculum at all Key Stage levels; and (ii) what steps have been taken to reduce behavioural problems in the classroom in each of the last three years. (AQW 4199/10)

Minister of Education: Emotional well-being is a key element of the revised curriculum across all Key Stages. At Primary level it is taught through the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) Area of Learning. At Foundation Stage pupils should be enabled to explore their own and others’ feelings and emotions and by Key Stage 1 they should be looking at how their actions affect others. At Key Stage 2, teachers should enable pupils to develop knowledge, understanding and skills in their management of a range of feelings and emotions and the feelings and emotions of others.

At post-Primary level, emotional well-being is taught through the Learning for Life and Work (LLW) Area of Learning. Through exploration of personal health pupils are provided with opportunities to understand the importance of recognising and managing factors that may influence physical and emotional/mental health throughout life.

My Department's publication "Promoting and Sustaining Good Behaviour: A Discipline Strategy for Schools" sets out a support model of progressively more intensive interventions for pupils whose behaviour is challenging.

Tá Foireann Thacaíochta Iompair ag gach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne a sholáthraíonn comhairle do scoileanna ar chlár iomchuí iompair agus, i gcásanna áirithe, tacaíocht fhadtéarma do dhaltaí aonair, comhairle ghinearálta ar chur chuige iomlán scoile agus ar scileanna bainistíochta sheomra ranga múinteoirí a fhorbairt; agus comhairle láithreach de bhun teagmhas dáiríre.

Each Education and Library Board has a Behaviour Support Team which provides advice to schools on appropriate behaviour programmes and, in certain cases, short term support for individual pupils; general advice on developing whole school approaches and teachers classroom management skills; and immediate advice in response to serious incidents.

Education and Skills Authority

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 3400/10, 3780/10, and 3781/10, to detail (i) the number of staff seconded to the Education and Skills Authority implementation team, broken down by (a) job title; and (b) salary scale; and (ii) how many of these posts are located at (a) Forestview, Purdy's Lane, Belfast; and (b) Omagh Library, Spillars Place, Omagh. (AQW 4201/10)

Minister of Education: Tá miondealú ar fhoireann a tugadh ar iasacht don Údarás um Oideachas agus Scileanna ar taispeáint sa tábla thíos de réir teideal poist agus réimse tuarastail. Oibríonn ceathrar den fhoireann cuid den tseachtain ar an Ómaigh; tá siad lonnaithe i Radharc na Foraoise don chuid eile den tseachtain.

The breakdown of staff seconded to the Education and Skills Authority Implementation Team is shown in the table below by job title and salary range. Four staff work part of the week in Omagh; the remainder are based in Forestview.

Job Title	Salary scale	Number
Director (designate)	£82,000-99,500	2
Project Manager	£38,961-58,236	4
Principal Officer	£39,823-50,796	1
Deputy Principal	£30,142-38,893	1
Chief Executive Support Office Manager	£39,823-50,796	1
Transition Co-Ordinator	£48,800-53,043	1
Senior Support Officer	£30,142-38,893	2
Support Officer	£24,089-30,520	7
Project Officer	£31,753-52,205	3
Assistant Support Officer	£17,668-21,306	1
Administrative Support Officer	£15,726-16,830	1
Personal Assistant	£17,161-26,276	3
Total		27

Education and Skills Authority

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 3780/10, for a breakdown by location of the £359,000 accommodation costs incurred up to 31 October 2009 in preparation for the Education and Skills Authority at (i) Forestview, Purdy's Lane, Belfast; and (ii) Omagh Library, Spillars Place, Omagh. (AQW 4202/10)

Minister of Education: Tá miondealú leagtha amach sa tábla thíos ar na costais chóiríochta de £359,000 de réir suímh go dtí 31 Deireadh Fómhair 2009 in ullmhúchán don Údarás um Oideachas agus Scileanna.

A breakdown by location of the £359,000 accommodation costs incurred up to 31 October 2009 in preparation for the Education and Skills Authority is set out in the table below:

	(i) Forestview	(ii) Omagh Library	Total
Expenditure	£357,500	£1,500	£359,000

South Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Education why she has not re-constituted the South Eastern Education and Library Board. (AQW 4236/10)

Minister of Education: Bheartaigh mé gurbh é an bealach is fearr chun tosaigh do Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt ná a iarraidh ar an cheathrar Coimisinéirí fanacht don idirthréimhse go dtí go mbunófar an tÚdarás um Oideachas agus Scileanna. D'oibrigh an Bord go maith faoi na Coimisinéirí agus motháim fosta go mbeadh sé mícheart a chur isteach ar an chóras ag an am seo nuair atá fócas na hoibre coinbhéirseachta ar struchtúir agus próisis níos srúthlínithe a chur i bhfeidm.

I decided that the most appropriate way forward for the South Eastern Education and Library Board was to ask the four Commissioners to stay on for the transitional period until the Education and Skills Authority is established.

I feel it would be wrong to disrupt the system at this time when the focus of the convergence work is on having more stream-lined structures and processes.

Teaching Appointment Committees

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Education how the Teaching Appointment Committees will operate prior to the establishment of the re-constituted Education and Library Boards. (AQW 4238/10)

Minister of Education: Paragraph 10(2) of Schedule 2 to the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 provides that any vacancy or defect in the appointment of board members does not affect the validity of the Board's decisions. This also applies to the constitution of the teaching appointments committees.

Go dtí go gceapfar ball boird don idirthréimhse roimh bhunú an Údaráis um Oideachas agus Scileanna, síneadh na téarmaí oifige de bhall reatha. Soláthraíonn sé seo baill leorga le coistí ceapacháin mhúinteoireachta a chomhdhéanamh agus a fheidhmiú.

Pending the appointment of board members for the transitional period up to the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority, the terms of office of a number of existing members have been extended. This provides sufficient members for the constitution and operation of teaching appointments committees.

Changing Primary Legislation

Mr M Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail each step she is required to take as Minister to change any primary legislation. (AQW 4239/10)

Minister of Education: There are two options available to enable changes to be made to primary legislation.

These are to: -

- make primary legislation which amends the existing legislation, or
- make completely new legislation and repeal the existing legislation.

Sa dá chás, chomh maith leis na gnáthchéimeanna a ghlacadh mé agus mo Roinn i dtaca le forbairt bheartais, d'iarrfadh mé comhairle an Choiste Oideachais agus comhaontú an Phríomhfheidhmeannaigh i leith na reachtaíochta molta sula n-iarrfadh mé ar an Cheann Comhairle cead a thabhairt leis an Bhille a thabhairt isteach sa Tionól.

In both cases in addition to the normal steps I and my department would take in relation to policy development I would seek the advice of the Education Committee and the agreement of the Executive to the proposed legislation before asking the Speaker for permission to introduce the Bill to the Assembly.

The procedures in the Assembly are governed by Standing Orders 30 to 42 which can be found on the Assembly website at <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/sopdf/2007mandate/standingorders.htm>

Department of Education: Goods and Services Paid for Online

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) which goods and services provided by her Department can be paid for online; (ii) the total number of transactions processed by her Department for these goods and services in each of the last five years; (iii) the total number of these transactions which were (a) online payments; (b) payments by cheque; (c) postal order; (d) cash; or (e) other method; and (iv) the percentage of payments made online compared with other payment methods. (AQW 4292/10)

Minister of Education: Ní sholáthraíonn an Roinn Oideachais aon earraí agus seirbhísí ar féidir a íoc astu ar líne.

The Department of Education does not provide any goods and services which can be paid for online.

Education: Area Based Planning

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education for an update on (i) Area Based Planning; (ii) when the report of the central group to consider the future of post-primary education, will be acted upon; and (iii) whether there is work being carried out at departmental level to examine the implications of this report in terms of the cost and location of post-primary provision. (AQW 4304/10)

Minister of Education: Tugadh an beartas ar Phleanáil de réir Ceantair chun críche i mí Mhárta 2009 agus dréachtaíodh clásail i dtaca leis seo i leith an dara Bhille Oideachais atá faoi bhreathnú Choiste Oideachais an Tionóil faoi láthair.

The policy on Area-based Planning was finalised in March 2009 and clauses relating to this have been drafted for the second Education Bill which is currently being considered by the Assembly Committee for Education.

The Education and Skills Authority will have a statutory duty for Area-based Planning and overall operational responsibility for planning provision within the policy and strategic framework set by the Department. My Department is progressing work on detailed guidance on Area-based Planning, which will set out the roles and responsibilities of the key players as reflected in the Policy and draft Bill clauses and will take account of the recommendations contained within the “Together Towards Entitlement” Report.

The full Entitlement Framework will be a statutory requirement from 2013. I have considered carefully “Together towards Entitlement” and it is clear that we have made some progress towards the delivery of the Entitlement Framework, but not enough.

My officials are developing an action plan that responds to the recommendations in the report and ensures that the pace of change increases. Additionally I have asked Gavin Boyd and Sean Hogan to ensure, as part of their work on convergence, that there is sustained progress towards full implementation of the Entitlement Framework and that schools receive the support they need to improve the curricular offer available to their pupils. This is not simply about checking whether schools are offering a certain number of courses. It is about ensuring that the range of courses offered by each school is capable of supporting young people to achieve to their full potential with clear progression routes to fulfilling careers.

Education: Unofficial Selection Tests

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Education whether her Department is examining the impact of this year’s unofficial selection tests on (i) teachers; and (ii) pupils in primary schools. (AQW 4305/10)

Minister of Education: Scríobh mé chuig príomhoidí agus chuig cathaoirligh de Bhoird Ghobharnóirí de gach bunscoil ar 11 Bealtaine 2009 ag léiriú go soiléir an dualgais reachtúil a bhfuil orthu leis an churaclam

athbhreithnithe a sholáthar agus is é sin an réimse ar chóir dóibh fócas a dhíriú air ar mhaithe lena ndaltaí. Atreisíodh an teachtaireacht seo i dTreoir deiridh na Roinne um Aistriú 2010 a foilsíodh ar 25 Meitheamh 2009.

I wrote to principals and Chairs of Boards of Governors of all primary schools on 11 May 2009 making clear the statutory duty they have to deliver the revised curriculum and that is where they should be directing their energies in the interests of their pupils. This message was reinforced in the Department's final Transfer 2010 Guidance published on 25 June 2009.

It is evident from representations made to me that many educationalists, particularly those working within primary schools, are unhappy with the way that breakaway grammar schools have attempted to impose their independent admissions arrangements on primary schools. Testing, in whatever form it may take, places at risk delivery of the revised curriculum, and that is why I have urged all along that schools refrain from this practise, and allow primary school teachers and pupils to concentrate on what is most important for a child's educational development, the revised curriculum.

My Department continues to monitor the implementation of its Transfer 2010 policy.

Literacy and Numeracy Skills

Mr A Attwood asked the Minister of Education to outline the statistical model that her Department uses to measure the number of children leaving school without basic literacy and numeracy skills. (AQW 4306/10)

Minister of Education: Faightear an t-eolas litearthachta agus uimhearthachta i dtaca le páistí a fhágann scoil ó Shuirbhé bliantúil na bhFágálach Scoile a thaifeadann ceannphointí agus cáilíochtaí na ndaltaí sin go léir a fhágann oideachas dara leibhéil i ngach bliain acadúil. Soláthraítear an t-eolas don Roinn ag na hiarbhunscoileanna. Baintear úsáid as na gráid a bhaineann daltaí amach i mBéarla agus i matamaitic sa GCSE chun scileanna litearthachta agus uimhearthachta a thomhas.

The literacy and numeracy information relating to children leaving school is obtained from the annual School Leavers Survey which records the destinations and qualifications of all those pupils leaving secondary level education in each academic year. The information is provided to the Department by the post-primary schools. Literacy and numeracy skills are measured from the School Leavers Survey using the grades that pupils achieve in GCSE English and mathematics. The School Leavers Survey is the data source for the annual publication 'Qualifications and Destinations of School Leavers'.

Rights Respecting School Award

Mr R McCartney asked the Minister of Education if she has considered making the 'Rights Respecting School' award part of the school curriculum. (AQW 4308/10)

Minister of Education: Citizenship education, which includes human rights and social responsibility, sits at the core of the revised curriculum and is included under compulsory areas of learning for all pupils from Year 1 to Year 12. At primary level, it is part of the area of learning, Personal Development and Mutual Understanding and at post-primary level, Local and Global Citizenship is part of the area of learning, Learning for Life and Work.

Citizenship education will equip all pupils with the knowledge and skills they need to participate fully in society. They will have opportunities to use local and global examples to investigate topics such as diversity, inclusion, cultural heritage, equality, democracy, participation and human rights, for example the key principles outlined in instruments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Is ar gach scoil a chinneadh cad iad na hacmhainní, cláir nó seirbhísí a bhreithníonn siad a bheith iomchuí chun tacú lena soláthar curaclaim. Mar sin de, is ag na scoileanna aonair atá an rogha le páirt a ghlacadh i mBronntaí Scoileanna um Meas a Thabhairt do Chearta mar chuid dá soláthar oideachais Saoránachta.

It is matter for individual schools to decide which resources, programmes or services they consider appropriate to support their curricular provision. The choice on whether to take part in the Rights Respecting Schools Awards, as part of their delivery of Citizenship education, therefore rests with individual schools.

Education and Skills Authority

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost, to date, of the recruitment process for the Education and Skills Authority. (AQW 4344/10)

Minister of Education: Ba é costas ar phoist an Phríomhfheidhmeannaigh (Ainmnithe) agus an Chathaoirligh (Ainmnithe) a fhógairt a cheapfar mar fhoireann an Údaráis um Oideachas agus Scileanna (ESA) nuair a bhunófar an tESA ná £66,738. Thabhaigh ceapacháin seisear Stiúrthóirí (Ainmnithe) a bheidh mar fhoireann an ESA nuair a bhunófar an tESA costais de £50,612. Bhí costas de £4,167 ar fhógraíocht ar baill Bhoird an ESA a cheapadh, nár cheapadh go fóill iad. Tugann sé seo iomlán de £121,517 go dtí seo.

The cost of advertising the posts of Chief Executive (Designate) and the Chairperson (Designate) who will become Education and Skills Authority (ESA) staff once ESA is established, was £66,738. Appointment of six Directors (Designate) who will become ESA staff once ESA is established, incurred costs of £50,612. Advertising for ESA Board members, who have not yet been appointed, cost £4,167. This gives a total to date of £121,517.

Budget Cuts

Mr J McCallister asked the Minister of Education, in relation to recent budget cuts (i) what percentage of her budget has been cut; (ii) whether this percentage cut is capital or recurrent; (iii) if her Department has announced where these cuts are to be made; (iv) what impact this will have on the School Buildings and Repair Programme; and (v) whether any new school build projects will be affected. (AQW 4358/10)

Minister of Education: Of the £74 million savings to be delivered by my Department, £51.7 million are to be delivered from current expenditure with £22 million savings coming from capital investment. This equates to savings of to 2.6% from the current budget and 11.5% from the capital budget. I am currently considering options for delivering these savings and no decisions will be made or announcements made until an equality assessment is carried out on each of the proposals.

Ba mhaith liom a chinntiú chomh oiread agus is féidir go soláthrófar na coigiltí seo ar bhealach a laghdaíonn an tionchar ar sheirbhísí túslíne agus go gcinntíonn sé úsáid is fearr na n-acmhainní atá ar fáil ar mhaithe le gach páiste agus duine óg.

I want to ensure that as far as possible these savings are delivered in a way that minimises the impact on front line services and ensures the best possible use of all available resources for the benefit of all our children and young people.

I hope to be in a position to make final decisions in the coming weeks.

Bus Passes

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Education to outline the criteria used for issuing bus passes to children attending secondary schools in rural areas. (AQW 4379/10)

Minister of Education: The criteria used to determine eligibility for assistance with school transport (including “bus passes”) are, (a) distance (three miles in the case of pupils attending secondary schools), and (b) nearest suitable school.

Tá sainmhíniú cruinn ag an téarma “scoil oiriúnach”. Is ionann “scoil oiriúnach” agus scoil i gceann de na catagóirí aitheanta de Scoileanna Rialaithe, faoi Chothabháil, Chomhtháite, Gaeloidechais, nó Scoileanna sainchreidmheacha gramadaí nó Scoileanna neamh-shainchreidmheacha gramadaí. Ní ghlargtar leis aon shainmhíniú eile an téarma “oiriúnach”.

The term “suitable school” has a precise definition. A “suitable school” is one in the recognised categories of Controlled, Maintained, Integrated, Irish-Medium, or Denominational or non-Denominational grammar. No other definition of the term “suitable” is accepted.

Therefore, to be eligible for transport assistance to a secondary school, a pupil must live more than three miles from a suitable school, or have been refused a place in all suitable schools within three miles of the parental home.

DEPARTMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Hotels Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the number of nights in hotels booked for civil servants in his Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these hotel rooms, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3838/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The following table details the number of nights unused in hotel accommodation and the total costs incurred for each of the last five years:

Year	No of Nights Cancelled	Total Costs Incurred
2004/05	Information not held	£
2005/06	Information not held	£
2006/07	Information not held	£
2007/08	20	£110.24*
2008/09	28	£151.58*

* A small administration fee is charged for each cancelled booking rather than the full cost of the accommodation.

University Scholarships

Mr J Craig asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what monies he has allocated for scholarships in science, technology, engineering and mathematics in universities for the financial year 2010/11. (AQW 3850/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department does not currently provide funding for scholarships in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in universities. However, the Department has recently commissioned research into the possibility of providing a bursary or scholarship for STEM students. The research was commissioned to make recommendations on whether bursaries or scholarships would impact on the number of applications for STEM subjects, the types of bursaries or scholarships that should be made available and the impact on other subject areas.

The final report is due to be published shortly and I will provide you with a further update when this is available.

Admission to Higher Education

Mr T Lunn asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide the most recent years' comparative figures for the percentage of pupils from the four lowest socio-economic groups in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK gaining admission to Higher Education. (AQW 3856/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Information on the percentage of pupils from the four lowest socio-economic groups is not available.

However, as an alternative measure, my Department holds information on the percentage of young full-time first degree entrants to NI and GB Higher Education Institutions, from Socio-economic groups 4 to 7. For each of the last five academic years for which data are available these are detailed in the table below:

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
NI	42.4	41.2	41.0	41.7	40.6
GB	28.2	27.8	28.9	29.4	29.2

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Students: Drop Out Rate

Mr A Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the drop out rate for students in (i) Further Education colleges; and (ii) universities, who were studying STEM subjects in each of the past ten years. (AQW 3915/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning:

- i) The table below details the drop out rates for students studying STEM subjects in Further Education (FE) colleges in each of the last ten years for which data are available. Drop out rates in FE are calculated as the percentage of Final year enrolments who withdraw from their course. Overall drop-out rates in the context of students being tracked across academic years are not available.

Academic year	Drop out Rate
1998/99	8%
1999/00	7%
2000/01	6%
2001/02	7%
2002/03	8%
2003/04	8%
2004/05	9%
2005/06	10%
2006/07	9%
2007/08	9%

Source: Further Education Leavers Survey

- ii) Data on drop out rates in higher education (HE) are provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency to DEL and are calculated on a different basis to those in FE. In 2007/08, 11.3% of full-time first year undergraduates studying STEM subjects at NI Higher Education Institutions were no longer in HE following entry in 2006/07.

DEL does not hold this information for years prior to 2007/08. However further information may be obtained from: -

- a) For the academic years from 2001/02 - 2006/07: -

Higher Education Statistics Agency
95 Promenade
Cheltenham
Gloucestershire
GL50 1HZ

- b) For academic years prior to 2001/02: -

Higher Education Funding Council for England
12th Floor
Centre Point
103 New Oxford Street
London
WC1A 1DD

Holyland Area: Anti-Social Behaviour

Mr J Craig asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he has had with Queen's University, Belfast and the University of Ulster in the last year about anti-social behaviour in the Holyland area of South Belfast. (AQW 3991/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: As you may be aware, I contacted the Vice Chancellors of Queen's University and the University of Ulster on the morning of 18 March 2009, after the disorder the previous day in the Holylands area. Representatives from both universities have been liaising with my officials in helping to develop the Holyland Action Plan which was presented at the Second Holyland Stakeholder Forum.

In addition, representatives from both universities attended the Stakeholder Forums which I convened on 7 May 2009 and 28 October 2009.

University representatives continue to be involved with Belfast City Council's Holyland Inter-Agency Group which has agreed to take on a more strategic oversight role in addressing the ongoing problems associated with anti-social behaviour in the Holyland area.

Student Accommodation

Mr J Craig asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if there is a requirement on universities to provide accommodation for a minimum number of students. (AQW 3992/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: There is currently no requirement for either Queen's University Belfast or the University of Ulster to provide accommodation for a minimum number of students.

Whilst the provision of accommodation is primarily an issue for the universities, I have been advised by the University of Ulster that its current provision of over 900 student accommodation places at the Jordanstown Campus is not fully occupied. Queen's University has invested some £45m to date in creating the Elms Village which provides accommodation for nearly 1800 students.

PhD Research Students

Mr J Craig asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) how much money will be available for PhD research students in the next financial year; (ii) for where will this money become available; and (iii) for which subject areas. (AQW 4054/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning:

- (i) The financial year 2010/2011 budget for research (MPhil, DPhil PhD) and for approved courses of advanced study (Masters) is £13.3M. This includes funding for an additional 300 PhDs as outlined in (iii) below. The allocation between PhD and Masters level courses is at the discretion of the universities and these decisions have not yet been taken for the next financial year. It is therefore not possible at this stage to state how much funding will be allocated solely to PhDs.
- (ii) The £13.3M will be apportioned between Queens University and University of Ulster.
- (iii) Each year, my Department makes available funding to Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster for 495 postgraduate students, which includes (MPhil, DPhil PhD) and approved courses of advanced study (Masters) in the fields of Humanities, Science and Technology and Social Science. The universities are responsible for administering the postgraduate scheme and allocating the awards. They have discretion in determining how the funding is allocated. It is for each university to decide the mix of PhD and Masters studentship awards it wishes to make, within the levels of funding available and to meet its own strategic goals.

The Programme for Government committed the Department to "increase by 300 the number of PhD research students at local universities by 2010." taking the total number of research students supported by my Department in the academic year 2010/11 to 795.

These additional 300 PhD research places are being part funded by the "Funding for Innovation" stream and are focused on areas of economic relevance as agreed by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). The economic priority areas for the academic year 2010/11 are: agri-food, life and health sciences, advanced materials (including clean technologies), engineering, ICT, electronics, software engineering, construction (including clean technologies), creative media and financial services. In considering applications, account will be taken of engineering and technology, mathematical sciences and biological sciences which, as evidenced in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics) report, are particularly under-represented at doctoral level graduation in Northern Ireland.

Merger of Stranmillis College and Queen's University

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when the business case for the merger of Stranmillis College and Queen's University will be available. (AQW 4077/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The economic appraisal for the proposed merger of Stranmillis University College and Queen's University Belfast has been reviewed by my Department and is currently being reviewed by economists within the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). If approval is obtained from DFP, my Department will take a policy decision on the proposal and if this is supportive, it is intended that the proposal to merge will be put out to public consultation following engagement with the Employment and Learning Committee. I would expect that to be in Spring 2010. The economic appraisal will be available as a supporting document to the consultation.

DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Property Developers

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to list the number and names of property developers who have (i) declared bankruptcy; (ii) gone into administration; and (iii) entered into Individual Voluntary Arrangements in each of the last two years. (AQW 3969/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster):

1. It is not possible to provide the exact information requested. The Insolvency Service does not use any classification of property developer.
2. The table below shows the number, estimated liabilities and assets of Bankruptcies and Companies Wound Up by the Court within the "Construction" classification for the last two years for which information is available. Some may to varying degrees have been involved in property development but this could only be determined by checking each individual file the cost of which would be disproportionate.

	Bankruptcy Orders and Orders for Administration of Estates of Deceased Insolvents			Company Winding-Up Orders		
Construction (year ending) 31.03.2008)						
	No.	Liabilities £	Assets £	No.	Liabilities £	Assets £
General Construction & Demolition	99	5,422,386	2,689,761	15	1,127,414	297,047
Home Improvements	13	229,068	337,872	3	206,927	0
Decorating & Small Works	20	569,973	742,695	1	114,541	0
Building Repairs	6	1,078,780	122,816	1	54,157	0
Electrical & Plumbing	16	785,446	1,007,431	5	2,036,116	570,285

	Bankruptcy Orders and Orders for Administration of Estates of Deceased Insolvents			Company Winding-Up Orders		
Construction (year ending 31.03.2009)						
	No.	Liabilities £	Assets £	No.	Liabilities £	Assets £
General Construction & Demolition	107	13,273,236	4,134,736	17	3,071,503	65,274
Home Improvements	22	1,309,147	263,305	4	1,096,531	133,451
Decorating & Small Works	41	1,102,065	171,409	2	284,105	3,000
Building Repairs	21	1,423,224	8,309	5	562,349	974
Electrical & Plumbing	29	1,294,099	954,857	4	571,644	45,136

3. In addition, no Companies in Administration were classified as being in property development during this period. There were no companies in year ending 31.03.08 with descriptions connected to the general construction industry but in year ending 31.03.09 four companies were described as general builders and five as property owning and managing.
4. The Insolvency Service also maintains the Individual Voluntary Arrangement (IVA) Register. However, the information provided does not include debtors' trades or professions.

Wood Chip Boilers

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) how many (a) domestic; and (b) commercial wood chip boilers are currently in operation; and (ii) to detail the increase in usage in each of the last five years. (AQW 4007/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department only holds information on the numbers of wood fired boiler installations in Northern Ireland where a grant or other form of government intervention has occurred. The table below outlines the range of data in relation to the numbers of wood chip boilers and it includes an extrapolated figure from work commissioned in 2005 into the number and range of renewable energy installations in operation.

Year	Domestic Number of grants from Reconnect for wood fired boilers. 2006/08	Commercial Number of loans from the Carbon Trust for wood fired boilers	Number of domestic and commercial wood fired boilers from 2005 DETI study
2005			53
2006-07	514	9	
2007-08	740	9	
2008-09		4	
2009-10		7	
Total	1254	29	

Renewable Energy Sector

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he is taking to create jobs in the renewable energy sector; and what discussions he has had with other Ministers in relation to this. (AQW 4008/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI has designated specific resources to identify business opportunities in the renewable energy sector and build awareness of these within local industry. An Invest NI strategy for the renewables sector is under development, but several activities have been initiated to promote and stimulate the uptake by Northern Ireland businesses of the opportunities that are rapidly unfolding. One such activity of note was the very successful Northern Ireland Energy & Environment Conference in October 2009, which over 650 local businesses attended.

Invest NI is currently working with a number of clients providing products and services within a wide range of renewable sub-sectors; this includes onshore and offshore wind, marine, biomass, anaerobic digestion and solar thermal. Since April 2009, clients within the renewables sector have received financial assistance amounting to £4.4 million against total investment costs of £16.6 million for a range of activities including research and development, training, job creation and the development of collaborative networks. A number of other projects are at various stages of development and it is likely that some of these will come to fruition in the next financial year.

The Sustainable Energy Inter-Departmental Working Group, mandated by the Executive, will demonstrate a strategic, joined-up Government approach to Sustainable Energy; an area in which a number of Departments have legislative responsibility for energy efficiency and renewable energy. A sub-group, chaired by Invest NI, has been set up to look specifically at opportunities for 'green jobs' and skills development within Northern Ireland. This group focuses on the economic opportunities that might be realised through Departments' appreciation of the significant impact they have on generating and stimulating markets for sustainable energy goods and services and gearing their policies accordingly.

Invest NI also works closely with other regions on areas of mutual interest, particularly, in harnessing the economic potential of marine energy.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment has been made of the cost to the Northern Ireland economy resulting from the administration of the Presbyterian Mutual Society. (AQW 4071/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department has not made an assessment of the cost to the Northern Ireland economy resulting from the administration of the Presbyterian Mutual Society.

The Society continues to operate as a going concern under the management of the Administrator. I am, however, aware that these are exceptional circumstances and, following representations from one business which was affected adversely by the Society's current difficulties, I took action on their behalf which has resulted in HMRC deferring tax payments for them and similar cases for nine months.

I remain willing to consider any further representations from affected businesses which are made to me.

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any meetings or discussions that she, or her officials, have held with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety within the last year to discuss commitments under the Investing for Health strategy. (AQW 4181/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department's main contribution to the Investing for Health strategy is through the promotion by the Health and Safety Executive of workplaces as health promoting and safe environments. There are regular meetings with DHSSPS at official level to develop work in this area. DETI also continues to be represented at senior official level on the Group, chaired by the DHSSPS Minister, which oversees the strategy.

Gas and Electricity Bill Arrears

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 3683/10, (i) how many households have defaulted on (a) gas bills; and (b) electricity bills in the last year; and (ii) how many households have entered into a payment recovery scheme for (a) gas bill; and (b) electricity bill arrears in the last year. (AQW 4204/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:**(i) (a) Gas**

Phoenix Supply has advised the Department that 1,393 households defaulted on their gas bill in the last year. firmus energy has confirmed that 9 households defaulted within the last year.

(b) Electricity

NIE Energy Supply has advised that approximately 1.4% (around 10,000) of their domestic customers have defaulted on electricity bills in the last year.

(ii) (a) Gas

Phoenix Supply has advised that over the last year 685 customers entered into a repayment scheme for unpaid bills.

firmus energy has advised the Department that during the last year, they had 52 households on debt repayment schemes.

(b) Electricity

NIE Energy Supply has advised that approximately 8,000 domestic customers have entered into payment recovery arrangements in the last year for electricity bill arrears.

Companies in Receivership

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many companies have (i) gone into receivership; and (ii) laid-off staff on a short term basis, in the last year, broken down by constituency. (AQW 4258/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In the year ending 31 December 2009, 15 companies went into administrative receivership. In the same period 17 companies also went into administration, 76 companies were wound up by going into a creditors voluntary liquidation and 156 companies were wound up by Order of the High Court.

My Department does not collate information about short term staff lay-offs.

The Insolvency Service does not record the constituency in which an insolvent company carries on business. To obtain this information would necessitate examination of each individual case file, the cost of which would be disproportionate.

Papers Referred to the Executive

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to list the subject matter of each of the 22 papers that her Department referred to the Executive between May 2007 and 7 December 2009; and to state whether the Executive agreed each paper. (AQW 4268/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It is not our practice to disclose details of Executive business. The content of Executive papers and all aspects of Executive business are confidential.

Walled City Signature Scheme

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the development of (i) the Guildhall; (ii) St.Columb's Cathedral; and (iii) the First Derry Presbyterian Church as part of the Walled City signature scheme. (AQW 4380/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

- (i) The original economic appraisal for the Guildhall project was revised following the reduction in Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) funding. The revised economic appraisal is currently being considered on the basis of a funding shortfall of £2.72million. If the appraisal is supportive, NITB will be seeking

approval of the project through processes established for the Integrated Development Fund and the Northern Ireland Executive.

- (ii) A letter of offer for £2,029,279 was issued to St. Columb's Cathedral in February 2009. A project board has been created, tendering undertaken and contractors have been on site since January 2010 with the programme of works well underway. It is anticipated that the project will be completed by January 2011.
- (iii) A letter of offer for £1,387,279 was issued to the First Derry Presbyterian Church. A project board has been created and tendering undertaken. Contracts were signed with the successful contractors in January 2010 and works are due to commence on site in February 2010 with completion by February 2011.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Maze/Long Kesh Site

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to de-list any of the listed buildings on the Maze/Long Kesh site. (AQW 3887/10)

Minister of the Environment (Mr E Poots): I have no plans to de-list any of the listed buildings on the Maze/Long Kesh site. The original decisions to list and schedule structures at the Maze were taken only after a detailed examination and consideration of the architectural and historic significance of the site and buildings. Following the expression of concerns by the public, and some members of this Assembly, my predecessor asked the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (which is responsible within my Department for listing decisions) to carry out a further review of the listing and potential for delisting on this site. This review has concluded that the listed buildings on the site merit such protection.

Flights Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of flights booked for Civil Servants in his Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these flights, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4049/10)

Minister of the Environment: The table below gives details of the figures requested for my Department over the last five years.

Flights and expenditure details	2005- 06	2006- 07	2007- 08	2008- 09	2009- 10 (April 2009- to date)	Total
Number of flights	85	75	60	33	29	282
Expenditure incurred	£5,542	£5,859	£5,140	£4,689	£2,389	£23,619

PPS21

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the publication of PPS21. (AQW 4072/10)

Minister of the Environment: PPS 21 has been submitted to the Executive for consideration and will be published after it has been agreed.

Probationary Drivers

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister of the Environment, given the high rate of road deaths among young male drivers aged 18-24, if he has given consideration to the probationary drivers peer passenger restriction enforced in the State of Victoria in Australia, which permits probationary drivers to carry no more than one passenger aged between 16 and 21 years old, excluding family members, at any time. (AQW 4098/10)

Minister of the Environment: I am very concerned about the unacceptably high number of young and novice drivers involved in fatal and serious collisions on our roads each year. This is why I intend to consult shortly on Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) to reduce the exposure of risk to all new drivers. Preparation of the GDL consultation paper has involved considering evidence of graduated driving licensing systems in various countries including the State of Victoria in Australia.

Research from Victoria highlights that 26% of first year probationary drivers involved in fatal crashes were carrying multiple passengers, but only 9% of their total driving is with multiple passengers. The risk of a probationary driver being involved in a fatal crash increases four fold if they are carrying two or more passengers.

Under new graduated licensing regulations in Victoria (effective from July 2008), drivers on their “P1” licence are not permitted to carry more than one peer passenger (aged 16 -21 years). The P1 licence is awarded upon successful completion of the learner period, and must be held for at least one year before progressing to the minimum three year “P2” licence. Some exemptions are in place (e.g. for family members).

The introduction of similar passenger restrictions in Northern Ireland for newly qualified drivers will be one of a range of GDL - related measures which will be proposed in the forthcoming public consultation. Other examples of what will be discussed in consultation include night-time curfews, passenger restrictions and compulsory learning periods.

MOT Tests

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of cars which underwent their first MOT test in (a) 2005; (b) 2006; (c) 2007; (d) 2008; and (e) 2009, broken down by car type and manufacturer; and (ii) the number of cars which failed their first MOT test broken down by car type and manufacturer in each of these years. (AQW 4099/10)

Minister of the Environment: The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) collects data on vehicle registration and vehicle tests. However, information in the form requested is not readily available in the format requested and could be compiled only at disproportionate cost.

Bonfires: 11 July

Mr B Leonard asked the Minister of the Environment if 11 July bonfires on grounds owned or managed by local councils are (i) permitted by law; and (ii) covered by all categories of liability and indemnity insurances, as is required for all council premises, land and events. (AQW 4122/10)

Minister of the Environment: There is no legislation that expressly permits bonfires on grounds owned or managed by district councils.

As regards insurance, it is a matter for individual councils to consider and decide on the need to take out liability and indemnity insurance in connection with bonfires on lands owned and managed by them.

Local Council Pension Funds

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment if local councils have independent responsibility for managing their own employee pension funds, and if so, are any local council pension funds currently in deficit. (AQW 4129/10)

Minister of the Environment: District councils do not have independent responsibility for managing employee pension funds. District council employees are members of the Local Government Pension Scheme administered by the Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee.

Nitrates Directive

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of the Environment with whom the eventual liability for non-compliance with the Nitrates Directive lies in respect of (i) a failure to provide a lawful facility or process for the disposal of poultry litter; and (ii) any consequential failure to lawfully dispose of poultry litter. (AQW 4141/10)

Minister of the Environment: (i) The Nitrates Directive allows the application of poultry litter to land as a fertiliser within the 170 kilogrammes of Nitrogen per hectare per year livestock manure limit. The land spreading of poultry litter at this level is not sustainable in the long term due to the high phosphorus content of the litter, the enriched status of soils and the resultant impact on water quality. Further controls may be required under the Water Framework Directive.

In addition any poultry farms which exceed the thresholds of the Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations, are required to demonstrate that they have sufficient land to take the quantity of manure generated on the installation. Poultry litter to be put to any other use, may be considered a waste and in this case its disposal would be subject to further controls.

(ii) The responsibility to lawfully dispose of poultry litter falls to the farm on which the poultry litter arose, any other site to which it has been transferred for application or disposal and anyone transporting the litter.

Hydro-electric Turbine System

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of the Environment (i) if a licence was issued by his Department for the hydro-electric turbine system that has been in operation on the River Mourne at Sion Mills since 1996; and (ii) if his Department monitors the impact of the turbine system on the smolt and salmon population of the river Mourne. (AQW 4160/10)

- (i) Minister of the Environment: My Department is close to finalising a decision on the application for a licence for the hydro-electric turbine system in operation on the River Mourne at Sion Mills.
- (ii) The Northern Ireland Environment Agency, Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and Loughs Agency, which is co-sponsored by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, all have responsibilities for the monitoring of adult migrating salmonids and smolt runs under their respective legislation.

Freedom of Information Requests

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to list the councils that have failed to respond to Freedom of Information requests from members of the public in (i) 2007; (ii) 2008; (iii) 2009; and (iv) to date in 2010. (AQW 4178/10)

Minister of the Environment: District Councils in Northern Ireland are listed as distinct public authorities in paragraph 36 of Schedule 1 to the Freedom of Information Act 2000. The Department has no advisory or monitoring role in relation to the Councils' performance under the Act. Consequently, information on how many requests have not been answered by Councils is not held by the Department.

Minutes of Council Meetings

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to list the councils that do not publish minutes of council meetings on their websites. (AQW 4179/10)

Minister of the Environment: Castlereagh Borough Council and Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council do not publish minutes of council meetings on their websites.

Minutes of Council Meetings

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment if he plans to ensure that all councils publish up to date minutes of council meetings on their websites. (AQW 4180/10)

Minister of the Environment: It is my intention, as part of the local government reform programme to bring forward proposals that will provide for increased transparency in the operation of councils, including the publication of council minutes.

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any meetings or discussions that he, or his officials, have held with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety within the last year to discuss commitments under the Investing for Health strategy. (AQW 4182/10)

Minister of the Environment: Within the last year my Department has held no direct meetings or discussions with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on the Investing for Health Strategy.

However my Department has continued to contribute to targets in the current Investing for Health Strategy and to the Investing for Health Review throughout 2009. This includes responding to a comprehensive survey for the Investing for Health Review and reporting on ongoing commitments for air quality, road safety and other associated activities that contribute to the Investing for Health objectives.

Primacure Health Village, Ballygawley

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment why the Planning Service has recommended that the application for the proposed Primacure health village, Ballygawley, should be refused. (AQW 4185/10)

Minister of the Environment: The Department has judged the proposed development to be unacceptable under PPS1 General Principles and policy DES 2 Townscape of the Planning Strategy for Rural NI on the following grounds:

- the proposed development would overshadow, overlook and dominate adjacent dwellings adversely affecting their amenity; and
- the scale, form and massing of the buildings would be insensitive to the character of the area surrounding the site and would thereby fail to make a positive contribution to townscape.

Following consultation with Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council, an office meeting was held to discuss these issues involving elected representatives, the applicant and the agent. The application will be formally reconsidered and the Council re-consulted in due course taking into account the representations made at the office meeting and the Minister's Statement on Economic Development.

Peace Garden at Townsend Street, Strabane

Mr A Bresland asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the planning permission granted for the erection of memorial plaques in the Peace Garden at Townsend Street, Strabane. (AQW 4242/10)

Minister of the Environment: No planning permission has been applied for or granted for the erection of memorial plaques in the Peace Garden at Townsend Street, Strabane.

Bonfire Site in Antrim Borough Council Area

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment how much it cost to clean each bonfire site in Antrim Borough Council in each of the last five years. (AQW 4261/10)

Minister of the Environment: Antrim Borough Council only holds detailed records for the 2008/2009 financial year. The clean up cost of each bonfire site for that year is listed below.

Bonfire Site	Neillsbrook	Caulside	Total
Amount	775.00	1,220.00	1,995.00

Papers Referred to the Executive

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of the Environment to list the subject matter of each of the 47 papers that his Department referred to the Executive between May 2007 and 7 December 2009; and to state whether the Executive agreed each paper. (AQW 4278/10)

Minister of the Environment: It is not my Department's practice to disclose details of Executive business. The content of Executive papers and all aspects of Executive business are confidential.

Bilingual Street Signage Policies

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of the Environment which councils have bi-lingual street signage policies. (AQW 4397/10)

Minister of the Environment: My Department does not hold any information on councils bi-lingual street signage policies.

District councils are statutory authorities in their own right, and are responsible for fulfilling their obligations under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Government Owned Land in East Belfast

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the land in the East Belfast parliamentary constituency which is currently held by Government Departments and their agencies; and to outline the proposals each Department or Agency has for each land holding. (AQW 3701/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): The information requested is detailed in the attached table.

Name of Land or Building	Postal address (if available)	Owned or Leased	Current use of land/building	Proposed future use
DOE				
Driver & Vehicle Agency, Driving Test Centre	Dill Road Castlereagh Belfast BT6 9HT	Owned	Driving Test Centre	Driving Test Centre
Shandon Park Mound	To rear of local resident No 43 Shandon Park, Knock, Belfast	Owned	Historic Monument in State Care (Anglo-Norman Motte)	The Department has a statutory duty to continue to protect this monument
DCAL				
PRONI	Titanic Quarter	250 year lease	New Public Record Office – under construction	New Public Record Office – under construction
DSD				
	155-157 Newtownards Road & 2 Tower Street	Owned	Vacant Land	Regeneration purposes
	232 Newtownards Road	Owned	Derelict Building	Regeneration purposes
	275-277 Albertbridge Road	Owned	Vacant Land	Regeneration purposes

Name of Land or Building	Postal address (if available)	Owned or Leased	Current use of land/ building	Proposed future use
	2-10 Castlereagh Street/139-141 Albertbridge Road, 1a Stormount Lane and 16-24 Castlereagh Street	Owned	Vacant land and derelict buildings	Regeneration purposes
Former Hospital/Health Centre	98-98a Templemore Avenue	Owned	Derelict Building	Regeneration purposes
Former Rupert Stanley College	55 Templemore Avenue	Owned	Derelict Building	Regeneration purposes
	183-191 Beersbridge Road	Owned	Vacant Land	Apartment development
	211-217 Beersbridge Road	Owned	Vacant Land	Retail/apartment development
	130-138 Castlereagh Street/60-64 Clondeboyne Street	Owned	Vacant Land	Regeneration Purposes
DRD				
Land	351 Albertbridge Road, Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	355 Albertbridge Road	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	357 Albertbridge Road	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	11 Barnett's Crescent Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	13 Barnett's Crescent Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	15 Barnett's Crescent Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling occupied	17 Barnett's Crescent Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	12 Barnett's Crescent Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	14 Barnett's Crescent Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	16 Barnett's Crescent Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	18 Barnett's Crescent Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling – occupied	21 Barnett's Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	25 Barnett's Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	29 Barnett's Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	17-19 Connswater Street Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling – Vacant	37-45 Connswater Street Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme

Name of Land or Building	Postal address (if available)	Owned or Leased	Current use of land/ building	Proposed future use
Land	1 Finvoy Street Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling – Vacant	15 Finvoy Street Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	17 Finvoy Street Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	19 Finvoy Street Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	21 Finvoy Street Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	23 Finvoy Street Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling- Vacant	25 Finvoy Street Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	27 Finvoy Street Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling - Vacant	31 Finvoy Street Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling - Vacant	37a Finvoy Street Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling - Vacant	2 Finvoy Street Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling - Vacant	6-8 Finvoy Street Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	65 Holywood Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	Hollywood Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Surplus	Disposal
Land	87-89 Old Holywood Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Surplus	Disposal
Land	91 Old Holywood Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Surplus	Disposal
Land	93 Old Holywood Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Surplus	Disposal
Land/Site	1 Humber Street Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	7 Humber Street Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	1 & 7 Humber Street & 159-163 Dee Street Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Surplus	Disposal
Land	159-163 Dee Street Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	86-88 Kings Road & 1 Knockdene Park Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	4 Knock Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land/Site	4a, 6 & 6a Knock Road & 45 Knockdene Park Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme

Name of Land or Building	Postal address (if available)	Owned or Leased	Current use of land/ building	Proposed future use
Land/Site	30-32 Knock Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land/Site	34-38 Knock Road + lands at Cherryvalley Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	42 Knock Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land/Site	44 Knock Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	46-50 Knock Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	52 Knock Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land/Site	62 Knock Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land/Site	70-72 Knock Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	74 Knock Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	80 Knock Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	82-86 Knock Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	88-96 Knock Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	98-104 Knock Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	2 Orangefield Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	14 Orangefield Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	16 Orangefield Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	20 Orangefield Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	22 Orangefield Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling – occupied	15 Parkgate Avenue Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	10 Parkgate Avenue Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Commercial Property – Occupied	12 Parkgate Avenue Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	12a Parkgate Avenue Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling – vacant	14-16 Parkgate Avenue Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling – vacant	22 Parkgate Avenue Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme

Name of Land or Building	Postal address (if available)	Owned or Leased	Current use of land/building	Proposed future use
Dwelling	26 Parkgate Avenue Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	Scrabo Street Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Surplus	Disposal
Land	27 Upper Newtownards Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling – vacant	29 Upper Newtownards Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling	35 Upper Newtownards Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	481 Upper Newtownards Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling – vacant	62 Upper Newtownards Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling – vacant	64 Upper Newtownards Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling – blocked up	68 Upper Newtownards Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	Beechill Road/Cedarhurst Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	East Link Road Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	Hanwood Park/East Link Road Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	21-23 Connswater Street Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	47-53 Connswater Street Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Commercial Property – Occupied	380 Newtownards Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Commercial Property – Occupied	382 Newtownards Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Commercial Property – Occupied	386-388 Newtownards Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	Newtownards Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Surplus	Disposal
Land	Saintfield Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	183 Saintfield Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Surplus	Disposal
Land	32 Gortin Park Belfast	Wayleave	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	38 Gortin Park Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	27 Abbey Park Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	692 Ravenhill Road Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	694 Ravenhill Road	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme

Name of Land or Building	Postal address (if available)	Owned or Leased	Current use of land/building	Proposed future use
Land	696 Ravenhill Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	Depot Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	Depot Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Surplus	Disposal
Land	27 Sandhill Gardens Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	14 Ballylenaghan Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Surplus	Disposal
Dwelling – occupied	87 Abbey Park Belfast	Leasehold	Surplus	Disposal
Land	Dunlady Road/Dunlady Manor Dundonald	Freehold	Surplus	Disposal
Land	Blanchflower Park Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Surplus	Disposal
Land	27 Grampian Avenue Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	26 Grampian Avenue Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	28-30 Grampian Avenue Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	441A Beersbridge Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling – occupied	11 Shandon Park Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling – occupied	13 Shandon Park Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	2-4 Shandon Park Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	Parkway/Belmont Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Surplus	Disposal
Dwelling	1 Kenbella Parade Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Dwelling – occupied	72 Kingsdale Park Belfast	Leasehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	Railway Lands Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	Beechill Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	Beechill Road, Purdysburn Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	Abbey Road & Comber Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	276a Comber Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Surplus	Disposal
Land	278 Comber Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold	Surplus	Disposal
Land	Knock Dual Carriageway & Newtownbreda Road Belfast	Fee Simple/Freehold		Unsaleable
Land/Site	360 Comber Road Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme

Name of Land or Building	Postal address (if available)	Owned or Leased	Current use of land/ building	Proposed future use
Land	13 Hanwood Park Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	15 Hanwood Park Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	17 Hanwood Park Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	29 Hanwood Park Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	21 Hanwood Park Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	23 Hanwood Park Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	25 Hanwood Park Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	27 Hanwood Park Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	33 Hanwood Park Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	35 Hanwood Park Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	39 Hanwood Park Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	41 Hanwood Park Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	43 Hanwood Park Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	45 Hanwood Park Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	47 Hanwood Park Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	3 The Close Millar's Forge Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	5 Millar's Lane Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	4 Grahamsbridge Road Dundonald	Leasehold	Surplus	Disposal
Land	40-56 Beechwood Manor Dundonald	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	Beechill Road/Beaufort Avenue Castlereagh	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	16 Berkley Road/Beechill Road Castlereagh	Fee Simple/Freehold	Surplus	Disposal
Land	Beechill Road Castlereagh	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	Cedarhurst Road/Beechill Road Castlereagh	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme
Land	Cairnshill Park & Ride Castlereagh	Fee Simple/Freehold	Interim Estate	Held for future road scheme

Name of Land or Building	Postal address (if available)	Owned or Leased	Current use of land/ building	Proposed future use
Land	Millmount Dundonald	Owned	Estate	Acquired for a Park and Ride Site
DHSSPS				
Joss Cardwell Centre	401 Hollywood Road Belfast	Owned	Vacant	Belfast Trust have proposals to re-use
Cregagh Clinic	331 Cregagh Road Belfast	Owned	Vacant	Belfast Trust have proposals to re-use
Dundonald Health Care Centre	16 Church Road Belfast	Owned	Health Centre	N/A
Palmerston House	6 Palmerston Road Belfast	Owned	Leased to Clanmil Housing Association	N/A
North Road Children's Home	60 North Road Belfastq	Owned	Children's Home	N/A
Former Willowfield Childrens Home	12 Willowfield Avenue Belfast	Owned but lon lease to Clanmil	Supported Housing	N/A
Pine Lodge Elderly Persons Home	186 Belmont Road Belfast	Owned	Elderly Persons Home	N/A
Woodstock Lodge	1-15 Woodstock Link Belfast	Owned	Mental Health Services	N/A
Dundonald Mens Hostel	53-57 Davaar Avenue Belfast	Owned	Vacant	Property to be sold early 2010
Ettaville	4 Kirkliston Drive Belfast	Owned but leased to NI Assoc for Mental Health	Mental Health Services	N/A
Ravenhill Adult Centre	318-322 Ravenhill Road Belfast	Owned	Day Centre	N/A
The Island Resource Centre	7 Cuba Walk Belfast	Owned	Day Centre	N/A
Millars Lane Day Centre	13 Millars Lane Enler Park Belfast	Owned	Day Centre	Services to relocate to new Enler Centre. When complete property to be sold
Beersbridge Road Family Centre	216 Woodstock Road Belfast	Owned	Family Centre	N/A
Edgecumbe Training and Resource Centre	10 Edgecumbe Gardens Belfast	Owned	Day Centre	N/A
Arches Well Being and Treatment Centre	1 Westminster Avenue Belfast	Owned	Wellbeing and Treatment Centre	N/A
Braniel Clinic	16 Glen Road Belfast	Owned	Part Vacant – joint user property with Library	Property to be sold
195 Templemore Avenue	195 Templemore Avenue Belfast	Owned	Office and Support Services	N/A
Gilnahirk Rise Belfast	2 Gilnahirk Rise Belfast	Owned	Office and Support Services	N/A
Victoria Day Centre	Unit 5 25 Tamar Street Belfast	Owned	Day Centre	N/A
Knock Golf Club	Summerfield Stoney Road Belfast	Owned but leased to Knock Golf Club	Used as part of Knock Golf Club	N/A
Ulster Hospital	700 Upper Newtownards Road Belfast	Owned	Acute Hospital	N/A

Name of Land or Building	Postal address (if available)	Owned or Leased	Current use of land/building	Proposed future use
Cherryvalley Health Centre	17 King Square Belfast	Owned	Health Centre	N/A
McCartney House	529 Upper Newtownards Road Belfast	Owned	Vacant	Belfast Trust have proposals to re-use
DFP				
Stormont Estate and associated buildings and land	Upper Newtownards Road Belfast	Owned	Office and recreational use	N/A
Rosepark House and associated buildings and land	711-715 Upper Newtownards Road Belfast	Owned	Office use	N/A
83 Ladas Drive Belfast	83 Ladas Drive Belfast	Owned	Office use	N/A
Hollywood Road JBO	106-108 Hollywood Road Belfast	Owned	Office use	N/A
Health Estates	Stoney Road Belfast	Owned	Vacant	Transferring to Hospital Trust
Netherleigh	Massey Avenue Belfast	Owned	Office use	N/A
Arches Centre	Bloomfield Avenue Belfast	Leased	Office use	N/A
DARD				
Portal Inspection Office, Belfast City Airport	George Best Belfast City Airport, Sydenham Road Belfast	Leased	Portal Inspection Duties	No change of use proposed.
AFBI Stoney Road	Stoney Road Belfast	Owned	The land and buildings are used to provide and support scientific services	No change of use proposed

Buildsoft Programme

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) how many capital projects; and (ii) how much individual data, including key performance indicators, have been input to the Buildsoft programme. (AQW 4013/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are 709 projects, in total, registered on the 'Buildsoft' system.

There are 645 individual scorecards associated with these projects, created in the program. Of these, 536 scorecards have been completed.

The scorecards require multiple data inputs relating to Government Construction Clients Group Key Performance Indicators, Customer Satisfaction and Sustainability.

The total number of projects registered on the 'Buildsoft' system includes 327 capital projects.

Buildsoft Programme

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he can confirm that analytical data from only one capital project has been input to the Buildsoft programme. (AQW 4014/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are 709 projects registered on the 'Buildsoft' system, of which 327 are capital projects. Of these capital projects, 249 have scorecard data recorded against them.

Achieving Excellence in Northern Ireland - Validation of Construction Management Maturity Report

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many drafts were prepared before the final publication of the 'Achieving Excellence in Northern Ireland - Validation of Construction Management Maturity' report. (AQW 4015/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: An initial and a final draft report were prepared by Constructing Excellence in Northern Ireland (CEni) prior to the publication of its 'Achieving Excellence in Construction - Validation of Construction Management Maturity' report.

Achieving Excellence in Northern Ireland - Validation of Construction Management Maturity Report

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) his Department's input; and (ii) Central Procurement Directorate's input into the 'Achieving Excellence in Northern Ireland - Validation of Construction Management Maturity' report. (AQW 4016/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Central Procurement Directorate (CPD), within the Department of Finance and Personnel, commissioned Constructing Excellence in Northern Ireland (CEni) to prepare the 'Achieving Excellence in Construction – Validation of Construction Management Maturity' report.

Departments and Centres of Procurement Expertise (CoPEs), with significant construction procurement programmes, use a National Audit Office Maturity Matrix to self-assess their progress in implementing the 'Achieving Excellence in Construction' initiative.

In preparing its report, CEni conducted structured interviews with the Departments and CoPEs and reviewed the evidence to support the self-assessment scores. CPD attended the interviews and contributed to the evidence in respect of the Departments for which it acts as a CoPE.

CPD provided written feedback on the layout, format and general content of CEni's initial draft report. CPD did not comment on CEni's validated maturity scores. CEni subsequently issued a final draft to Departments and CoPEs for their comments in November 2008. CEni published its final report in April 2009.

Unfilled Vacancies in the Civil Service

Ms M Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of unfilled vacancies at Staff Officer level in the Derry City Council area across each Civil Service Department; and at which locations they are based. (AQW 4022/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Only DSD has unfilled vacancies in permanent posts at Staff Officer level, in the Derry City Council area, as follows:

- North West Development Office (1)
- Foyle Jobs and Benefits Office (0.2)

Unfilled Civil Service Vacancies in the Derry City Council Area

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number and location of unfilled vacancies at Staff Officer level in the Derry City Council area in each Department. (AQW 4062/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Only DSD has unfilled vacancies in permanent posts at Staff Officer level, in the Derry City Council area, as follows:

- North West Development Office (1)
- Foyle Jobs and Benefits Office (0.2)

Achieving Excellence in Northern Ireland - Validation of Construction Management Maturity Report

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he can confirm that (i) his Department; and (ii) Central Procurement Directorate, had no input, either written or verbal, to the production and finalisation of the contents of the 'Achieving Excellence in Northern Ireland - Validation of Construction Management Maturity' report. (AQW 4068/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Central Procurement Directorate (CPD), within the Department of Finance and Personnel, commissioned Constructing Excellence in Northern Ireland (CENi) to prepare the 'Achieving Excellence in Construction – Validation of Construction Management Maturity' report.

Departments and Centres of Procurement Expertise (CoPEs), with significant construction procurement programmes, use a National Audit Office Maturity Matrix to self-assess their progress in implementing the 'Achieving Excellence in Construction' initiative.

In preparing its report, CENi conducted structured interviews with the Departments and CoPEs and reviewed the evidence to support the self-assessment scores. CPD attended the interviews and contributed to the evidence in respect of the Departments for which it acts as a CoPE.

CPD provided written feedback on the layout, format and general content of CENi's initial draft report. CPD did not comment on CENi's validated maturity scores. CENi subsequently issued a final draft to Departments and CoPEs for their comments in November 2008. CENi published its final report in April 2009.

Efficiency Savings

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) what systems are in place to (a) monitor; and (b) secure efficiency savings within his Department; (ii) how often these systems are reviewed; and (iii) for his assessment of their effectiveness. (AQW 4074/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The systems which are in place to monitor and secure efficiency savings within my department are the ongoing monitoring of business performance against PfG/PSA targets, departmental targets, agency Ministerial targets and ongoing internal financial management.

These systems are reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure that they continue to be effective in meeting business needs.

Review of Public Administration

Mr J McCallister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) for an update on his Department's implementation of the Review of Public Administration; (ii) if he is on target to meet the March 2011 RPA saving targets; and (iii) how staffing levels have been reduced as a result of RPA. (AQW 4107/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: No services within my department have been identified for transfer to local councils or to any of the other bodies being established as a result of the Review. The department therefore has no RPA savings target and staffing levels will not be directly impacted as a result of RPA.

DFP has a key role to provide advice and guidance to departments and public sector employers in order to effect the smooth transfer of staff to the new organisations established as a consequence of the Review of Public Administration. The department has contributed to the development of guidance notes and a Code of Practice on Staff Transfers developed in consultation with Trade Union.

Land Registry

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) how many people are currently employed in Land Registry; (ii) at what grade; and (iii) what are the pay bands for these grades. (AQW 4130/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Land Registry (the office responsible for registering the ownership of land in Northern Ireland) was formerly part of the organisation known as Land Registers of Northern Ireland. It merged with, and became part of, Land & Property Services on 1 April 2008.

The table below provides details of staff employed in Land & Property Services who provide the services required to cover registration functions in accordance with the Land Registration Act (Northern Ireland) 1970.

Grade	Staff in Post	Full Time Equivalent (FTE)	Pay Band (as at 01/08/08)
Grade 5	2	1.8	Pay Band 1 (Senior Civil Service 2009 Pay Bands apply at this grade)
Grade 6 Solicitor	1	1	£46,400 to £62,407
Grade 7	1	1	£39,823 to £50,796
Principal Legal Officer	4	3.6	£39,823 to £50,796
Deputy Principal	5	4.55	£30,142 to £38,893
Deputy Principal Accountant	1	1	£30,142 to £38,893
Staff Officer	9	8.5	£24,098 to £30,520
Executive Officer I	9	8.9	£20,801 to £26,086
Executive Officer II	20	18.54	£17,668 to £21,132
Senior Mapper	2	2	£17,668 to £21,132
Administrative Officer	85	80.14	£14,890 to £17,099
Mapper	5	4.96	£14,890 to £17,099
Administrative Assistant	23	22.07	£13,130 to £14,420
Typist	1	1	£13,130 to £14,420
Total	168	159.06	

Land Registry

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what were the running costs of Land Registry in each of the last five financial years. (AQW 4131/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Land Registry (the office responsible for registering the ownership of land in Northern Ireland) was formerly part of the organisation known as Land Registers of Northern Ireland. It merged with, and became part of, Land & Property Services on 1 April 2008.

The table below shows running costs in connection with land registration for the last five financial years.

Financial Year	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009
Costs	£14.214m	£15.969m	£16.693m	£16.502m	£12.548m

Land Registry

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many queries were received by Land Registry from the general public in each of the last five years. (AQW 4132/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Land Registry (the office responsible for registering the ownership of land in Northern Ireland) was formerly part of the organisation known as Land Registers of Northern Ireland. It merged with, and became part of, Land & Property Services on 1 April 2008.

The following table shows the number of land registration queries received in each of the last five years. These were mainly received from the general public and members of the legal profession acting on behalf of the citizen.

Queries received in respect of Land Registration queries for the last five years.	
Period	Total
1 April 2005 to 31 March 2006	78,764
1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007	83,885
1 April 2007 to 31 March 2008	88,832
1 April 2008 to 31 March 2009	71,723
1 April 2009 to present	47,379

Mortgage Rescue Scheme

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why every in-year monitoring round bid by the Department for Social Development for funding for a mortgage rescue scheme has been unsuccessful.

(AQW 4186/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: DSD have submitted a bid in respect of the Mortgage Rescue Scheme in every monitoring round of the 2008-09 and 2009-10 financial years, with the exception of February 2008-09.

However, DFP did not receive a business case for this scheme until 10 February 2009. In response to DFP's initial assessment of the business case, DSD suggested progressing the advisory element of the proposal on a pilot basis to assess the extent of the requirement in Northern Ireland. Initially it was to be a six month pilot, but in April, DSD extended this to 12 months after which, the scheme would be given further consideration. We have not yet received any details of this evaluation in order to support the bid.

Notwithstanding the failure of this bid to secure funding, it is important to recognise that throughout the 2008-09 and 2009-10 financial years DSD received 47.2% of the capital investment allocations made through the in-year monitoring process.

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail any meetings or discussions that he, or his officials, have held with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety within the last year to discuss commitments under the Investing for Health strategy.

(AQW 4188/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Neither I nor my officials have had meetings or discussions with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety within the last year to discuss this issue.

Delivery of Capital Projects

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to list any specific projects that have benefited from his Department's decision to speed up the delivery of capital projects.

(AQW 4191/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Chancellor's Pre Budget Report 2008 provided my Department with the opportunity to accelerate capital expenditure funding from 2010-11 into 2008-09 and 2009-10.

The decision to accelerate £9.4 million into 2008-09 was taken in the 2008-09 December Monitoring, and the Executive Response to the economic downturn exercise, where it formed part of the overall funding envelope available to the Executive. Allocations of £26.8 million capital investment were made to departments in this exercise: £20m to DARD for the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme; £1.8m to DRD for Transportation Capital Works and £5m to DSD for the shortfall in Housing Executive receipts.

During 2008-09 and 2009-10, the construction industry benefited significantly as a direct result of the Executive's commitment to the Investment Strategy. The latest forecast information provided by departments indicates that gross capital investment by the Executive during 2009-10 will be in excess of £1.7 billion. This represents a similar level to that achieved in 2008-09, and an increase of 20% from 2007-08.

Civil Service Employees

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many people were employed in the Civil Service, at year end, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4209/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of staff (permanent and temporary), based on headcount, employed in each of the 11 Northern Ireland Departments and their agencies at 1 January in each of the last 5 years is set out in the attached table.

NICS Staff (Headcount) in the eleven NI Departments and their Agencies at 1 January 2005 – 1 January 2009

Year	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Staff Headcount	28105	27977	26855	24501	25081

Notes:

1. Figures at 1 January 2010 are not yet available
2. Staff on Career break are excluded.
3. Staff on secondment within the NICS are included within the Departments to which they are seconded.
4. Both permanent and casual staff are included.
5. Staff in executive Agencies are included in the figures for their parent Department.

Papers Referred to the Executive

Mr G Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to list the subject matter of each of the 94 papers that his Department referred to the Executive between May 2007 and 7 December 2009; and to state whether the Executive agreed each paper. (AQW 4265/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is not the Executive's practice to disclose details of Executive business. The content of Executive papers and all aspects of Executive business are confidential.

Nuffield Report

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the recently published Nuffield Report which claims that the health service in England has a greater level of efficiency than the service in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. (AQO 698/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: As Finance Minister I welcome the Nuffield Report. It provides a useful insight into the funding and performance of the NHS across the UK. Importantly, it supports existing evidence that demonstrates that the health service in England has relatively fewer resources than Northern Ireland but still delivers more. The report concludes that overall NHS expenditure per capita in Northern Ireland has been higher than in England consistently since 1996 but that Northern Ireland has lower levels of productivity.

The Nuffield Report confirms the need for DHSSPS to continue to deliver further efficiency savings and service improvements. It supports the Executive's decision as part of the Budget 2008 – 2011 to seek for efficiencies across all departments. The DHSSPS is allocated almost 50 per cent of the Northern Ireland Block and much more needs to be done to ensure that resources are being directed to the frontline and where they are needed most.

The report shows that the health service in Northern Ireland is performing relatively well in terms of outputs per capita but relatively poorly in terms of outputs per staff member. I look forward to hearing the Health Minister's response to the Nuffield Report.

All-Island Procurement

Mr A Attwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what assessment there has been of the opportunities for savings through all-island procurement of goods and services; and what plans the Central Procurement Division has to advance this approach. (AQO 700/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Central Procurement Directorate has lead on a small number of all island procurements. For example they put in place an all island fridge disposal contract which won a UK wide waste management award.

In addition, CPD has provided their professional support in the development of the Republic of Ireland's (RoI) new National Public Procurement Unit (NPPOU). The development of this unit will create increased opportunities for all island collaborative arrangements which in the past have been difficult due to the large and varied number of Contracting Authorities in RoI.

It should be recognised that the development of all island contracts is both time and resource intensive. In addition, it presents risks such as currency fluctuations, different governance arrangements and legal frameworks. While aggregation of spend can improve overall value for money it can impact on small businesses which make up the majority of local supplier.

Ulster Savings Certificates

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he has taken to trace the owners of the £6 million in Ulster Savings Certificates still outstanding between 1922 and 1991. (AQO 701/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: My Department is responsible for administering the Ulster Savings Scheme, and maintains a list of all valid certificates when the scheme was formally withdrawn on 31 March 1997. The Department continues to make payments to investors on production of a valid certificate or, in the case of lost certificates, on completion of an indemnity form.

In 2007, Ulster Savings Scheme contact details were made available on the DFP website. The Post Office and National Savings also provide contact details in relation to the Scheme. In 2009 information was also made available on the newly launched NI Direct website.

Officials in my Department have worked closely with the NI Consumer Council to raise awareness of the Scheme through the local media and the potential of using 'Myforgottenaccount' website is also being pursued.

I met with the Consumer Council on 3 December 2009 and as a result, a further publicity campaign was undertaken during December 2009. As a result of this campaign, my Department has received valid claims from investors for around £17,000, the payments for which are currently being processed.

During 2009/10 a total of £205,000 has been paid to 82 individuals.

Government Decentralisation

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline his plans in relation to the decentralisation of Government Departments and their agencies. (AQO 702/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have no plans to decentralise Government Departments or Agencies. That is a matter for agreement by the Executive, provided it can be convinced that to do so is affordable and represents good value for money.

Public Service Cuts

Mr T Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether, in the consideration of financial cut-backs, account was taken of additional costs incurred by public services in the West of Northern Ireland due to the wide dispersal and remoteness of the population. (AQO 703/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Review of 2010-11 Spending Plans was undertaken to address the significant spending pressures facing the Executive next year with the aim of ensuring that public finances remained on a secure basis.

It is for individual Ministers to determine how the savings agreed by the Executive should be achieved in line with the priorities set out in the Programme for Government.

In order to facilitate the consultation process, I have asked my Ministerial Colleagues to publish these details on departmental websites.

Civil Service Equal Pay

Mr J Wells asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the timetable for the settlement of the equal pay award for individual civil servants. (AQO 704/10)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is not possible to give a timescale at present. Whilst NIPSA have confirmed their decision to accept the offer they still need to complete the legal process leading to the withdrawal of claims. There will be a detailed and lengthy process to be followed before payments can be made. The precise details of the process and the timescales are currently being developed but it is my intention that it should not take any longer than is absolutely necessary.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Health and Social Care Trust: Cost of Employing Hairdressers

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the annual cost to each Health and Social Care Trust of employing hairdressers. (AQW 3924/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): Expenditure on hairdressing is not collected centrally. Hairdressing provision varies across all Trusts and is used for dementia patients, older people, elderly rehabilitation, patients receiving Chemotherapy and wig fitting for therapeutic reasons.

Hairdressers also perform non-hairdressing duties such as shaving for male mental patients.

Swine Flu Pandemic

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the claims by the Head of Health at the Council of Europe that the swine flu pandemic was one of the greatest medical scandals of the century and that the vaccination programme was unnecessary. (AQW 3927/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am aware of the comments made by Mr Wolfgang Wodarg and note the World Health Organisation has described his claims as “irresponsible” and dismissed them as “scientifically wrong and historically inaccurate”. I can advise that all decisions on Swine Flu policy here have been taken in accordance with the best available scientific advice in the UK and the swine flu vaccination programme has been guided by the advice of the independent Joint Committee for Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) at all times.

New Fire Station in Cushendall

Mr D McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the provision of a new fire station in Cushendall. (AQW 3928/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service has completed a feasibility study on the original site at Coast Road in the town and is now developing an outline Business Case which will be submitted in due course to my Department and DFP for consideration.

Causeway Hospital: Surgical and Medical Wards

Mr B Leonard asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many junior doctors are attached to surgical and medical wards in the Causeway Hospital; (ii) how the ratio of junior to senior doctors in the Causeway Hospital compares to other hospitals; and (iii) for his assessment of whether staffing levels in the Causeway Hospital’s surgical and medical wards render a safe hospital environment and service. (AQW 3943/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Junior doctor rota allocations, which were made in August 2009, indicate that 29 junior doctors were attached to surgical and medical specialities at the Causeway Hospital. The Department does not collect data centrally on the ratio of junior to senior doctors for each hospital.

The provision of safe and effective services is fundamental to the Health and Social Care service and integral to this are regular reviews of staffing levels across all specialties including surgery and medicine.

Recurrent Funding Budget

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department operates a recurrent funding budget. (AQW 3948/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: DHSSPS operates a recurrent funding budget.

Leaving Foster Care: Support and Protection to Young People

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what levels of support and protection are offered to young people who decide legally, under the regulations contained in their Residents Order, to leave their foster home at sixteen years of age. (AQW 3975/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Residence Orders may be particularly suitable for older children/young people who are in stable and secure foster placements and it is unlikely that there will be a conflict between the birth parents and the carer who has acquired a Residence Order.

A young person subject to a Residence Order is no longer a Looked After Child and the carer has parental responsibility and is not a foster carer, although financial support may be provided in the form of a Residence Order Allowance.

Trusts do however have a general duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children within its area who are in need. When a Residence Order comes to an end Trusts carry out a full assessment of the young person's needs under Article 18 of the Children (NI) Order 1995. This will enable the Trust to determine the level of support, intervention, pathway and protection that is required for that young person. In some cases due to the young person's vulnerability this may entail making them Looked After and providing all the support this entails.

Daisy Hill Hospital: Reception Service

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he can confirm that the 24 hour telephone reception service at Daisy Hill Hospital is to be reduced by over 40%, and that the subtracted hours will be transferred to Craigavon Area Hospital. (AQW 3977/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust is currently reviewing the switchboard service at Daisy Hill Hospital. The Trust is at the very early stages of its review and has not made any decisions regarding operating hours or location.

Health Related Trips: Hiring of Taxi Firms

Mr M McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there is a policy within each Health and Social Care Trust in relation to the hiring of taxi firms for health related trips, and whether there is an open and transparent procurement process; and if he will make a statement on this matter. (AQW 3982/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is an open and transparent procurement process. The DHSSPS Business Services Organisation's Procurement & Logistics Service oversee the tendering process for the provision of taxis for the Health & Social Care Trusts. Contracts are awarded to the tenderer(s) whose tender has been judged to have been most economically advantageous with regard to a range of financial and qualitative criteria. Procurements are conducted in line with relevant standards and legislation, including those in respect of openness and transparency.

Each Health and Social Care Trust follows protocols when authorising the use of taxis. The protocols require each service group to have eligibility criteria for the use of taxis. Taxis are only used in cases where the criteria are met and after all other more cost effective transport options have been exhausted.

Health Service: Nursing Posts

Mr M McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many student nurses qualified in the last eighteen months; (ii) of these, how many have been successful in gaining nursing posts in the Health Service; (iii) how many have had to seek work abroad; and (iv) how many have had to take up other employment or seek government benefits. (AQW 3984/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: From July 2008 to January 2010, 1010 student nurses qualified in Northern Ireland. The number of nursing training places commissioned annually is based on workforce planning estimates, aimed at ensuring a supply of trained nurses to meet the needs of the HSC. Universities collect only a limited amount of data following graduation and this information is not sufficiently robust to provide a definitive answer on employment outcomes or those moving to government benefits. The majority of newly qualified nurses can be expected to take up positions in the HSC.

Nurse to Patient Ratio

Mr M McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) if there is a minimum nurse to patient ratio standard in acute specialist services to ensure improved patient outcomes and protect safety standards; (ii) to provide up-to-date nurse to patient ratio details in each acute speciality including intensive care, acute dialysis, coronary care units and neonatal units etc; (iii) to provide comparative details for nurse to patient ratio in these specialties at January 2007; (iv) for his assessment of whether these levels of staffing are sufficient in 2010; (v) to provide evidence of staffing consistency in all Health and Social Care Trusts in the past year; and (vi) to make a statement on these matters. (AQW 3985/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) There is no minimum nurse to patient ratio standard in acute specialist services.
- (ii) This information is not available.
- (iii) This information is not available.
- (iv) Safety and quality of care is a priority for the service. Trusts through their governance arrangements must ensure that they maintain safe staffing levels.
- (v) This information is not available.
- (vi) Currently the overall ratio in Northern Ireland of registered nurses and midwives to support staff is 74% registered to 26% support staff. This ratio recognises that some areas such as Intensive Care will operate on a higher ratio in order to provide safe and effective care for patients. The clinical need of patients determines the appropriate treatment and care and the levels of nursing, medical or social care intervention.

Nursing Skill Mix

Mr M McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there is a minimum benchmark for the nursing skill mix of hospital wards and acute settings; and what action he has taken to drive this issue forward to protect the safety and well-being of patients. (AQW 3986/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is no minimum benchmark for the nursing skill mix of hospital wards and acute settings. Staffing ratios should reflect the number and dependency of patients and therefore it will vary between clinical settings.

Currently the overall ratio in Northern Ireland of registered nurses and midwives to support staff is 74% registered to 26% support staff. This ratio recognises that some areas such as Intensive Care will operate on a much higher ratio in order to provide safe and effective care for patients.

Wheelchair Upgrades

Mr M McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how long wheelchair dependent patients with pressure sores have to wait for a wheelchair upgrade in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 3998/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Trust staff would initially review the patient's wheelchair cushion utilising a pressure mapping system that can confirm the suitability of the patient's existing cushion. The Trust retains a small stock of pressure relieving cushions which can be issued immediately if required.

Where the need for a change of wheelchair is identified, a full Occupational Therapy assessment is carried out. Once the prescription for the new wheelchair is agreed, one which meets the user's specific needs, the wheelchair is ordered immediately. In general, the delivery time is 6 weeks.

In addition, Occupational Therapists work closely with District Nursing colleagues and Tissue Viability Nurses during pressure care management.

Cocaine Abuse

Mr M McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many hospital admissions were related to cocaine abuse in (a) 2009; and (b) 2010 to date; (ii) for a breakdown of these admissions by age; (iii) if he will prioritise a public health campaign publicising the dangers of cocaine and other recreational drugs; and (iv) if he will make a statement on this matter. (AQW 3999/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information is not available on the number of hospital admissions which were related to cocaine abuse in 2009 or 2010.

Cocaine use is an issue my Department takes very seriously. Through the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs, relevant literature and education/information programmes currently available to young people, young adults, parents and professionals at both regional and local level provide information on cocaine, particularly highlighting the risks associated with its use. In addition, schools address cocaine use as part of the substance misuse programme of their "Preparing for Life" education courses. In 2009 the former Health Promotion Agency (now the Public Health Agency) produced a booklet entitled "The Truth About Cocaine", they also produced a targeted convenience advertising campaign on the issue.

My Department has recently commissioned research projects looking at cocaine use and users, in terms of prevalence and attitudes. Once finalised, these research projects will inform decisions in relation to the need for a targeted regional cocaine public information campaign, and how this should be developed.

IVF/ICSI

Ms D Purvis asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when funding will be available to provide three full cycles of IVF/ICSI treatment as recommended by NICE; and, when he intends to introduce a cycle of Frozen Embryo Transfer in addition to the stimulated cycle of treatment currently available. (AQW 4009/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Northern Ireland aspires to provide three cycles of fertility treatment as recommended by NICE however financial constraints currently make this unachievable. The current provision of one publicly funded cycle of treatment is comparable to many other areas of the United Kingdom.

Last year I announced an additional £1.5m recurrent funding for fertility services. This, in addition to an investment of £800k in a waiting list initiative, means that no patient will now wait more than 12 months for treatment from being placed on a waiting list. It is hoped that it will also be possible to introduce a cycle of Frozen Embryo Transfer in addition to the currently funded stimulated cycle of treatment where this is appropriate. This is something that the Belfast Trust is keeping under review.

Fertility Treatment

Ms D Purvis asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how Health Service fertility treatment in Northern Ireland compares to the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQW 4011/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information is not available to do a comprehensive comparison of provision between regions however I am aware that many regions across the UK provide a greater number of treatment cycles than the available resources currently permit in Northern Ireland. Access criteria in Northern Ireland are however wider than in some other regions of the UK, thus allowing more people to avail of one cycle of publicly funded treatment. A recent public consultation on access criteria in Northern Ireland supported the current criteria.

Transporting Non-Emergency Patients

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration he has given to co-operation with the community transport sector in transporting non-emergency patients to routine outpatient appointments. (AQW 4012/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My officials recently met with the Department of Regional Development to discuss the potential for co-operation between Health and Social Care services and the community transport sector. When the DHSSPS and DRD met it was agreed that as comprehensive provision already existed there was limited scope for co-operation. I am confident that the arrangements which already exist to aid patients in accessing health and social care services are operating effectively. However I have no objection to the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service or other health and social care trusts working in partnership with rural community transport providers to improve access for patients in rural communities.

Efficiency Plans

Ms C Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions he has had with staff-side representatives regarding his Department's efficiency plans. (AQW 4017/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have met with Regional Trade Union Representatives in my Department's Partnership Forum at which this topic is regularly discussed. HSC employers have also been keeping local Trade Union representatives informed of their proposals for efficiency savings and the impact that this will have on Health and Social Care.

Domestic Violence

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the role of Social Services when they are requested to intervene in a domestic violence situation, in relation to the victim and children who are resident in the family home. (AQW 4026/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Social Services have a general duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children by providing directly, or arranging for others to provide, services designed to meet children's assessed need including the parent's/carers capacity to keep the child safe and to promote the child's welfare.

All children referred to Social Services, including for reasons of Domestic Violence, are subject to a family and child assessment of need and risk. This assessment will determine the appropriate pathway for Social Work intervention which could be through family support or child protection. In some instances information and advice may be given and no further Social Work involvement required.

The Department and NIO have also launched jointly a five-year strategy for tackling domestic violence and abuse in the key areas of prevention; protection and justice; and support. The Department is in discussion with Women's Aid Federation and DENI regarding delivery of educational programmes for school children which are age-specific and teach children about personal safety and healthy non-violent relationships.

Denta Express Clinic, Irvinestown

Mr T Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total cost to date of the treatment of Health Service patients at the Denta Express Clinic in Irvinestown; and if he can confirm that Health Service patients, whose treatment was incomplete when the clinic closed, can access treatment elsewhere. (AQW 4029/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: DentaExpress was not sponsored by my Department but was a business venture set up by local businessmen, which provided both Health Service and private dental treatment. The total Health Service treatment costs paid by Business Services Organisation to DentaExpress, was £67,317.44 during the period that this practice was operational i.e. from 30 March 2009 until 31 December 2009.

Any patients who were deregistered from DentaExpress when it ceased practising can register for Health Service treatment with any general dental practice in the area which is currently taking Health Service patients. The recently-opened Enniskillen Oasis Dental Care practice, or the Omagh Oasis Dental Care practice due to open at the beginning of February 2010, are such practices. Patients can register using this internet site: <http://www.oasisdentalcare.co.uk> from which page there is a link to Oasis' Northern Ireland business.

Occupational Therapy Officers

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to ensure that there is cover available for Occupational Therapy officers who are off on leave. (AQW 4031/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: All Health Service staff have a right to take annual leave. Staffing levels are set taking into account that periods of absence on leave should be covered. This is the responsibility of HSC organisations and must be managed locally to ensure continuity of service.

Hotels Booked for Civil Servants

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of nights in hotels booked for Civil Servants in his Department which were paid for wholly, or in part, but never used; and (ii) the costs and loss of revenue incurred booking these hotel rooms, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4042/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This information is not held centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Swine Flu

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to estimate how much money will be saved within the Health budget with the reduction in swine flu cases. (AQW 4043/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As part of the December Monitoring Round it was predicted that Swine Flu would cost in the region of £61.5m. This estimate is being re-evaluated, and an updated bid will be submitted to DFP as part of the February Monitoring Round.

Causeway Hospital

Mr A McQuillan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he has any plans to downgrade the Causeway Hospital from its current status. (AQW 4056/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can assure you that I have no plans to downgrade Causeway Hospital either now or in the future.

Swine Flu Vaccine

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much has been spent to date on vaccines for swine flu. (AQW 4058/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department is unable to divulge the monetary value of vaccines as it would violate confidentiality clauses in the contracts with the manufacturers.

Swine Flu Vaccine

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many swine flu vaccines were stock piled. (AQW 4059/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: To date in NI we have received 751,200 vaccines. Of that total, 416,600 vaccines have been distributed to GPs/Trusts to vaccinate those individuals in phase 1 and 2 of the vaccination programme. Trusts/GPs can now order any additional stock they require from the regional pharmacists. There are currently 334,600 vaccines held centrally in Northern Ireland.

Swine Flu Vaccine

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many doses of the swine flu vaccine have been administered to date. (AQW 4060/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: By 16 January 2010, a total of 252,182 swine flu vaccinations have been administered in Northern Ireland.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Mr P Butler asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many primary school pupils have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in each of the last five years, in each Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 4070/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available centrally.

Tamiflu Vaccine

Mr A Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what will happen to the Tami Flu vaccines that are not used. (AQW 4076/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Tami flu is an antiviral, not a vaccine.

A small number of Tamiflu courses have been made available for purchase to other countries in need. This does not affect the ability to treat people in Northern Ireland. The majority of the Tamiflu stockpile will be maintained to mitigate against the possibility of a third pandemic wave or a future pandemic.

Occupational Therapists

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to increase the number of Occupational Therapists available to carry out visits in relation to applications for disabled facilities grants and disabled aids so that these applications can be completed and processed more quickly. (AQW 4088/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Currently all referrals to the Occupation Therapy service are subject to a 13-week response time. Referrals to OT resulting from applications for Disabled Facilities Grants are also subject to these timescales.

There is presently significant pressure on all aspects of OT services (assessing clients for Disabled Facilities Grants forms only a part of an OTs workload). Health and Social Care Trusts are working to find more efficient ways of working to cope with these additional pressures and resource constraints.

Hypothermia

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people were admitted to hospital with hypothermia since 1 October 2009; and how many of these patients died. (AQW 4089/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is not yet possible to give an accurate assessment of the number of people that were admitted to hospital with hypothermia since 1 October 2009; and of these the number of patients that died.

Medical Detoxification

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what services are currently provided for the medical detoxification of patients with dual addictions of drugs and alcohol. (AQW 4091/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Detoxification services across Northern Ireland are offered in a range of settings from the client's own home to acute general hospitals depending on the client's medical condition. A range of the services provided is set out below:

- community detoxification led by the GP is provided in the patient's own home for those clients who have no major health problems, and have high levels of motivation and support;
- home detoxification is also offered in the patient's own home in partnership with GPs and Addiction Services for those patients who need additional support. Addiction nurses visit daily and support both the carer and the patient;
- clients who meet the criteria for home detoxification but who do not have supportive domestic arrangements can be offered a detoxification service in community based staffed hostel facilities; and
- inpatient detoxification in acute general hospitals for clients who have a history of Delirium Tremens or other serious health problems.

Mephedrone

Mr B Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment has been made of the impact and availability of the drug Mephedrone; and what steps he proposes to take to ban its sale over the counter. (AQW 4096/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: 'Legal highs' are substances currently not controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and which are self-administered to achieve an altered state of mind.

It is the duty of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) to advise Ministers on appropriate measures to be taken with respect to drugs which are being, or appear to them are likely to be, misused and which are causing or may cause a social problem. Following recent reports of the availability of mephedrone and emerging evidence of its harms, the ACMD is now looking at this issue as a priority, and are due to report in early 2010. The ACMD assessment of a drug's harms is a key consideration in any decision to bring forward proposals to control any drug.

My approach is to act to protect the public from dangerous or otherwise harmful drugs. The availability of these so-called "legal highs" changes the environment in which some young people are now finding themselves. It is therefore imperative that appropriate legislation is introduced that not only deals with current trends but also foreseeable ones. To this end, legislation was introduced on the 23 December 2009 to make it illegal to possess or distribute a range of substances including:

- GBL and 1,4-BD;
- BZP and a group of substituted piperazines;
- a range of synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists; and
- 24 anabolic steroids, and two growth promoters.

Swine Flu Vaccine

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for a summary of the uptake of the swine flu vaccine for the 2009/10 winter, broken down by 'at risk' groups. (AQW 4101/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: GPs and Trusts are reporting good uptake for all groups with an overall total of over 252,000 people vaccinated to date

By the 16th January 2010 the uptake of the swine flu vaccine for the 2009/10 winter, broken down by 'at risk' groups was as follows:

At Risk Group	Cumulative number received 1st dose to end of reporting period.
Under 65 At Risk	124,304
65+ At Risk	68,637
Over 6 months, Under 5 years	11,336
Pregnant Women	10,461
At Risk Inpatients	1,409
Egg Allergy	665
Special Schools	2,136

Patient Transport

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people, who would otherwise have qualified, were denied patient transport due to recent winter pressures, since the start of December 2009 in each Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 4102/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) does not collect patient transport data for Health and Social Care Trust areas.

Nuffield Report

Mr J Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action his Department intends to take to address the issues raised in the Nuffield Report 'Funding and Performance of Healthcare Systems in the Four Countries of the UK Before and After Devolution'. (AQW 4112/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Nuffield report is based on out of date information, does not adjust figures to account for the integration of Health and Social Services and in several cases fails to use the correct information. The last year of data they analysed was 2006, since then we have had devolution, RPA and waiting list initiatives. To that extent it is unhelpful to me in forming any kind of view on relative performance today.

Disabled Facilities Grant Reports

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he would co-operate with the Minister for Social Development to discuss the secondment of an Occupational Therapist to DSD to ensure that referrals and reports necessary for disabled facilities grants are carried out in good time. (AQW 4119/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Referrals to the Occupational Therapy service relating to a claim for Disabled Facilities Grant will always need assessment at a local level which would be carried out by an occupational therapist based in the client's local HSC Trust.

A permanent Housing Adaptations Liaison Manager post is funded jointly by DHSSPS and DSD and is based in the NIHE to promote interagency communications.

My Department is working with DSD and the NIHE to review housing adaptations and to seek ways to improve the processes involved.

Occupational Therapists

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if Occupational Therapists' (i) reconsiderations; and (ii) recommendations, are co-ordinated on the same criteria, with uniform wording, in each Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4120/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The process of reviewing the circumstances of disabled people in relation to housing adaptations is undertaken in accordance with regionally agreed criteria for the provision of housing adaptations. This criteria has been regionally agreed by the Occupational Therapy Community Managers Forum and was reviewed in 2009 in response to the need for continuity across the services regionally.

The current DSD/DHSSPS interdepartmental review of housing adaptations will review the design standards and interagency communications between the five HSC Trusts and housing providers in relation to recommendations for housing adaptations.

While standardisation of interagency practice is desirable in many situations, the ability to respond to the complex and sometimes unique circumstances of disabled people and their families with customised design solutions, needs to be maintained.

Late Discharge of Patients

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many 'bed days' were lost due to late discharge of patients in 2009. (AQW 4126/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: We do not hold data totalling lost bed days due to late discharge.

Winter Vomiting Bug

Mr T Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there have been any outbreaks of the 'winter vomiting bug' in hospitals this winter; to detail where they occurred and the number of ward closures which occurred as a direct result. (AQW 4128/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There have been 12 outbreaks of the 'winter vomiting bug' in hospitals this winter. Outbreaks occurred in the Belfast City Hospital, Bluestone Unit CAH, Craigavon Hospital, Daisy Hill Hospital, Moyle Hospital, Longstone Hospital, RBHSC, St Lukes and the Ulster Hospital

No wards were closed, however 19 wards throughout the hospital system stopped admitting new patients temporarily to prevent the spread of the virus.

Proposed Health Village at Ballygawley

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he, or his officials, have held any meetings with Primacure in relation to the proposed health village at Ballygawley. (AQW 4177/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Neither myself nor officials from my Department have held meetings with Primacure in relation to proposals in Ballygawley or anywhere else in Northern Ireland.

Ketogenic Diet

Mrs C McGill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many (i) full-time; and (ii) part-time staff are currently employed in the Health Service to administer the ketogenic diet; and how long

is the post-assessment waiting list in each Health and Social Care Trust for patients who need this treatment.
(AQW 4263/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Belfast Health & Social Care Trust delivers a regional epilepsy service, which includes treatment with ketogenic diets. Within the Belfast HSC Trust, there is one (0.5 whole-time equivalent) staff member employed to administer the ketogenic diet. There is currently funding for a further 0.5 whole-time equivalent member of staff. There are currently 10 people on the waiting list for post-assessment by dietetics. Patients are not assessed by dietetics until treatment can commence.

Evergreen Centre at Gransha Healthcare Park

Mr M Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) if the Evergreen Centre at Gransha Healthcare Park is registered with the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority; (ii) to detail the activities regulated under any such registration; and (iii) the date this registration came into effect. (AQW 4273/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Evergreen Day Care Centre at Gransha Health Care Park is not registered with the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA).

RQIA has received an application for the registration of the Evergreen Centre in accordance with the Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 and, having carried out pre-registration inspections, requires the provider to carry out a number of actions to make the necessary changes, to allow registration to proceed.

DEPARTMENT FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Bus Lanes

Mr D Kinahan asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has received any correspondence on private hire taxis being permitted to use bus lanes in Belfast.
(AQW 4113/10)

Minister for Regional Development (Mr C Murphy): I can confirm that during my time as Minister for Regional Development I have only received two pieces of correspondence regarding private hire taxis using bus lanes in Belfast.

One was a letter from the Regional Development Committee and the other was a written assembly question.

Bus Lanes

Mr D Kinahan asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he has given to granting Private Hire Taxis 'permitted taxi' status on all bus lanes.
(AQW 4114/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service completed a detailed study on the use of bus lanes by motorcycles and private hire taxis in August 2008. The study made a number of recommendations for the future use of the bus lanes of which I am supportive. I have also sought the views of the Regional Development Committee. I am currently assessing all of the relevant information and will make a final decision in due course.

Bus Lanes

Mr D Kinahan asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) if the prohibitions on the types of vehicles using bus lanes are applied uniformly across Belfast; and (ii) to make a statement on why certain categories of vehicle are permitted to use the bus lanes while others are not.
(AQW 4124/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that most bus lanes in Belfast are available to buses, permitted taxis, cycles and motorcycles, during their hours of operation. However, for safety and traffic control reasons there are some bus lanes which are not available to all of these categories

of vehicles. These include the bus lanes on the motorway and any contraflow bus lanes. Taxis and motorcycles are not permitted into the East Bridge Street bus lane as there is electronic detection equipment embedded in the carriageway which detects buses and changes the traffic lights to assist them. Only buses or vehicles of a comparable size would be large enough to trigger this equipment.

As explained in my reply to your question AQW 4114/10, I am currently considering a Roads Service study on the use of bus lanes by motorcycles and private hire taxis. I will consider making a statement when I make a final decision on the outcome of that study.

Resurfacing Pavements

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development, on average, how often pavements are resurfaced. (AQW 4142/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service undertakes an annual programme of footway reconstruction and resurfacing works, subject to the availability of financial resource.

This programme is prepared taking account of a range of factors including usage of the footway, its general surface condition, structural deformation, as well as the number of public enquiries and public liability claims.

A number of factors affect the condition of a footway and the resultant time span between surface treatments. These include the quality of the initial construction, the wear they have experienced from traffic due to vehicle overrun / parking, how frequently they have been excavated to install and repair public utility services, weather conditions and, of course, how they have been maintained.

Pavements: South Belfast

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to improve the pavements in the South Belfast constituency. (AQW 4143/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service undertakes an annual programme of reconstruction and resurfacing works, which is implemented on a scheme priority basis and subject to the availability of financial resources. In general, Roads Service does not hold information on schemes on a constituency basis. However, the works programme for Eastern Division, for the 2010 – 2011 financial year, is currently being developed and will include footway improvement schemes in the South Belfast constituency.

I would remind the Member that information on completed and proposed schemes can also be found in the Roads Service's Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from the Roads Service internet site at the following web address:

<http://www.drdni.gov.uk/index/publications/publications-searchall.htm>

Pavements Resurfacing

Mr C McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the criteria currently used by Roads Service to determine which pavements require resurfacing. (AQW 4144/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service undertakes an annual programme of footway reconstruction and resurfacing works, subject to the availability of financial resource.

I should explain that Roads Service has a statutory duty to maintain the public footways in a safe and serviceable condition. To comply with this duty, Roads Service operates a system of regular safety inspections to ensure that essential response maintenance is identified and completed, as necessary.

These safety inspections assess the condition of the public footways and the information gathered is then used in the preparation and prioritisation of Roads Service's annual footway reconstruction and resurfacing programme.

This programme is prepared taking into consideration a number of factors, including the usage of the footway, the general surface condition, any structural deformation, as well as the number of public enquiries and public liability claims.

NI Water Staff

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 3441/10, (i) on what date the four employees transferred became NI Water staff; (ii) from what company or agencies did they transfer; (iii) which office or department within NI Water managed the incorporation of the four new staff; (iv) under what regulations were these transfers made; (v) their grades and pay scales; and (vi) if there was any form of interview or selection process. (AQW 4145/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the information requested in relation to the four staff transferred into the company is as follows:-

- (i) the four staff transferred to NIW on 3 July 2009.
- (ii) they transferred from Steria Limited.
- (iii) the business improvement and information technology directorates of NIW managed two staff each.
- (iv) the transfers took place under the terms of the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 (TUPE).
- (v) the NIW grade equivalent for the transferred staff was two at Level 3 and two at Level 4. As they were all transferred to NIW under their existing terms and conditions of appointment, they were not positioned on the NIW pay scale for these grades but placed on individual pay points. NIW is unable to disclose details of their individual salaries under the terms of the Data Protection Act.1998.
- (vi) as the transfers took place under the terms of TUPE legislation there was no requirement to have an interview or selection process.

NI Water Staff

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 3441/10, if any further employees have transferred into NI Water since April 2007. (AQW 4148/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that, apart from the four staff mentioned in AQW 3441/10, no further employees have transferred into the Company since April 2007.

NI Water Staff

Mr S Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 3441/10, what functions and posts were held by the 15 staff who transferred out of NI Water. (AQW 4150/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the functions and posts which were held by the 15 staff who transferred out of NIW are as set out in the table below.

Grade	Function	Post
Level 3 Manager	Information Technology	Service Manager
Level 4 Manager	Information Technology	Service Support Manager
Level 4 Manager	Information Technology	Customer Support Manager
Level 5 Manager x2	Information Technology	Shift Leader
Level 5 Manager x3	Information Technology	ICT Support Officer
Class I Industrial	Water Supply	Process Operator
Class II Industrial x 1	Water Supply	Process Operator
Class II Industrial x 5	Waste Water	Process Operator

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any meetings or discussions that he, or his officials, have held with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety within the last year to discuss commitments under the Investing for Health strategy. (AQW 4184/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have not had any discussions with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) within the last year on commitments under the 10 year cross cutting Investing for Health (IFH) Strategy, which was developed by the cross departmental Ministerial group on Public Health (MGPH). This group is chaired by the Minister for DHSSPS and membership comprises senior representatives from all Departments.

The Department was represented at official level at the meeting of the Ministerial Group for Public Health held on 10 December 2008 and will be represented at the next meeting planned for 25 February 2010. Discussions have taken place between my officials and DHSSPS officials on the Review of the IFH Strategy initiated in June 2009.

Although my Department does not have any specific targets in the IFH strategy, we have identified a range of actions to help meet its goals and objectives. These include the development and implementation of the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) and the Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS); extension of the concessionary fares scheme; the development of rural community transport programmes; the development of walking and cycling schemes and infrastructure; measures to reduce road traffic collisions; the improvement of drinking water quality; improved compliance with wastewater treatment works discharge standards; and the provision of some form of assistance to households without mains water supply to help improve the quality of their private supplies. There is regular contact between my officials and DHSSPS officials on all of these issues.

Directional Signage at Major Junctions

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) to detail the criteria used by Roads Service to determine which towns and locations are placed on directional signage at major junctions; and (ii) for an update on his Department's plans to install directional signage indicating 'Banbridge' at the Sprucefield junction on the M1. (AQW 4187/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it follows national standards in the design of its directional signage. This guidance includes, among other design considerations, advice that the number of side destinations on motorway direction signs should not exceed two locations. Therefore, it is not possible to include every possible destination along a route. Side destinations are chosen according to the particular route, along with major destinations such as "The SOUTH", and the route number.

With regard to directional signage on the M1 at Sprucefield, Roads Service decided to increase the number of side destinations to three at this location, because it was the minimum number considered necessary at this important junction. Roads Service has no plans to modify the existing signage, to include additional destinations, at this time.

Roads Gritted in the Upper Bann Constituency

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) to list the roads that were gritted; (ii) how many nights the roads were gritted; and (iii) the cost per night of gritting the roads in the Upper Bann constituency during the recent cold spell. (AQW 4196/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service does not hold information in respect of its Winter Service programme on a constituency basis. Roads included in the Roads Service gritting schedule within the Upper Bann Constituency are treated from its Craigavon and Banbridge depots. Information in relation to the roads gritted from these depots will be placed in the Library. It should be noted that Roads Service Section Office boundaries do not mirror constituency boundaries, therefore there will be a number of roads on the list provided that do not fall within your constituency.

I have taken the period of the recent cold spell as being from the 16 December 2009 to 13 January 2010 for the purpose of answering your question regarding the number of nights that the roads were gritted. Within this period a total of 59 primary gritting operations, along with other secondary gritting operations, were carried out.

Please note, that gritting was carried out daily, both during nights and mornings, along with other secondary gritting action during the daytime.

The average daily cost of gritting in the Craigavon and Banbridge areas, during this period, was estimated at £16,000 per day.

Roads Grittled Within Craigavon Section

- A3 Portadown Road from roundabout to junction with Francis Street
- A3 to Meeting Street in Moira
- Annesborough Road, Tanaghmore North Road, Casterbay Road, Lake Street, North Circular Road to B12 Cornakinneger Road
- Antrim Road to North Circular Road
- Artabrackagh Road to A3 Armagh Road
- B12 Aghalee Road to B105 Soldierstown Road, Aghalee
- B2 to Goodyear Roundabout
- B3 Plantation Road to A26 Waringstown Road Roundabout
- B76 (via Lurgan Town centre), to B3/A26 Roundabout
- B78 to A27 Mahon Road
- Bachelors Walk, Gilford Road, Moyallen Road, and A50 Banbridge Road, Gilford Road
- Backwood Road to 30 mph signs
- Ballycairn Road, Brankinstown Road, Derrymore Road, Cranagh Road Whitehall Road to the junction of B12 Aghalee Road
- Ballyhannon Road to Old Lurgan Road
- Balteagh Road to Highfield North
- Bleary Road to C155
- B2 Bluestone Road and B2 Drumnacanvey Road to Moyallen Road
- Bridge Street to Alexandra Crescent
- Brownlow Road to Drumgask Roundabout
- Brownlow Road to Lismore Roundabout
- Brownlow Road to Westacres Roundabout
- Bus Bays & offslip Road to the Junction of West Street to Traffic Lights at the junction of Northway
- C168 to B78 Markethill Road
- C169 and C168 to Laurelvale
- Carleton Street to Thomas Street
- Carnegie Street to end
- Carrickblackner Road to Bridge Street Roundabout
- Castle Street to Bridge Street
- Central Way dual carriageway to B&Q entrance
- Central Way to Marlborough House Roundabout
- Charles Street and Garvaghy Road to Ballyoran Hill
- Charles Street, Oakfield Terrace and Silverwood Drive to Francis Street
- B2 Charlestown Road, Derrytrasna Road, B2 Derrymacash Road, Ballynamony Road, Goodyear Roundabout
- C364 Clare Road to B3 Plantation Road
- B12 Cornakinneger Road to junction of Ballycairn Road, Aghalee
- Cornmarket Street, Montague Street and Ballymore Road to Turnberry Green
- Cottage Road to junction of Kilmore Road
- C156 Deans Road and C155 to B2 Drumnacanvey Road
- C156 Deans Road to Drumgask Road

- Dromore Road and B2 Lurgan Road to Banbridge Road Roundabout in Dromore
- Drumgor Road, Moyraverty Road, Drumgask Road to Monbrief Road
- Drumgor West Road and The Lakes to The Lakes Roundabout
- C356 Dunkirk Road to A26 Waringstown Road
- Edward Street, North Street, Lake Street and Victoria Street to Lough Road
- B3 Gilford Road and B3 Plantation Road to Wells Crossroads, Dunkirk Road, Bleary
- B3 Gilford Road and B3 Scarva Road to Tandragee Road
- Hall Road C358 to Waringstown Road
- Hanover Street to Church Street
- High Street (dual carriageway section) and Market Street to junction
- High Street to Thomas Street
- Highfield North Road to junction with Highfield Road
- Highfield North to Northway
- Highfield North to Roundabout at Highfield Road
- Hill Street to Kitchen Hill
- Hill Street to Union Street
- Hospital loop
- Kernan Hill, Carbet Road, Kilvergan Road
- Kernan Hill, M12 junction 1 Roundabout, Seagoe Road, Bridge Street, High Street, Castle Street, Wilson Street to entrance to railway station carpark, Garvaghy Road, Ballyoran Hill, Charles Street, Corcrain Road, & Northway to Mill Avenue
- Killycomain Road to Gilford Road Roundabout
- Kilmore Road to junction with Antrim Road
- Kiln Road to B76 Lough Road
- Kinnego Embankment to M1 Roundabout at Junction 10
- Kitchen Hill to Millennium Way, Alexandra Square, Alexandra Crescent to Kitchen Hill
- Knockmenagh Road, Parkmore Roundabout and Knockhenagh Roundabout, to Westacres Roundabout
- Lake Road to Central Roundabout
- Lake Road to Eastway Roundabout
- Lake Road to The Lakes Roundabout
- Lake Road to Tullygally Roundabout
- Lakeview Road Roundabout, Balteagh Road Roundabout, and Highfield Road Roundabout, to Highfield Roundabout
- Levin Road to Lake Street, Lake Street to North Circular Road
- LHS traffic island to M1 roundabout
- C358 Lisnasure Road to B9 Drumlin Road
- Lisniskey Lane & Lisniskey Road to roundabout at Lurgan Road
- Loop Church Place triangulated junction, Edward Street, Parkview
- B76 Lough Road and M1 Junction 10 Roundabout
- Lurgan Road and A3 Belfast Road, Avenue Road
- A3 Lurgan Road to junction of Backwood Road
- Lurgan Road and Church Road to Seagoe Road
- Lurgan Road, Upper Church Lane and Old Lurgan Road to junction of Lisniskey Lane
- M12 to junction with Northway
- M12 to South bound off slip Junction 1
- M12 from off slip Carn Roundabout (under roundabout) to end of on slip Carn Roundabout
- M12 left turn sliproad (across island) to Northway

- M12 under Carn Roundabout to end of Southbound onslip road, Carn Roundabout
- A51 Madden Road to Market Street (in Tandragee)
- Malcolm Road to High Street
- Malcolm Road from Right Turn Lane through Millennium Way Junction only
- Mandeville Road to Lurgan Road Roundabout, Roundabout no 6
- Mandeville Road to Central Roundabout
- Mandeville Road to Highfield Roundabout
- Mandeville Street & West Street, to Traffic Lights at Northway
- Market Street to Castle Street
- Market Street to Church Place
- Market Street to Mandeville Street
- B78 Markethill Road to A51 Marlacoo Road
- Marlborough Retail Park (Past B&Q) to Highfield Road Junction
- Meadow Lane to Thomas Street
- Meadow Lane, Portmore Street and Clonavon Avenue to Thomas Street
- Meeting Street, Clare Hill Road to Bottier Road
- Mill Avenue to Castle Street via Bridge Street and Castle Street to Park Road
- Mill Avenue to Northway
- C357 Mill Hill to A26 Waringstown Road
- Millennium Way to junction of Edward Street
- Millennium Way to junction of Malcolm Road
- Monbrief East Road, Monbrief Road, Tullygally Road, to Roundabout 2
- Mourne Road and Malcolm Road to Millennium Way
- Moygannon Road, B9 Drumlin Road and B9 New Forge Road
- Moylinn East Road to Drumgor Road
- Moyraverty Drive
- Moyraverty Road West and Drumgask Road to Moyraverty Road
- Moyraverty Road West to junction of Moyraverty Drive
- B2 Mullahead Road to A27 Portadown Road
- New Forge Road to A3 Lurgan Road
- Northway (to Portadown), off slip Road to Brownstown Road
- Northway to Roundabout at Marlborough House, Central Way to Central Way Roundabout
- Northway to traffic lights at Corcrain Road
- offslip Carn Roundabout to Carn Roundabout
- Old Lurgan Road to Bluestone Road
- Old Portadown Road to Tullygally East Road
- On slip Road to Northway to West Street traffic lights
- Onslip, M12 and M12 roundabout
- Park Road and Obins Street to Charles Street
- Portmore Street to Clonavon Avenue
- Princess Way to Killycomain Road Roundabout
- Russell Drive, Sloan Street to Edward Street
- A27 Scarva Road and A27 Auglish Road to B3
- Seagoe Link Road, Kernan Road, A27 Lurgan Road Roundabout & Mandeville Road to Highfield Roundabout
- Silverwood Road, Francis Street to Edward Street
- Southern M12 on slip to end

- Southern offslip to Carn Roundabout
- Station Road to B3
- Steps Road
- Steps Road, Magheralin Street and Portadown Road to Eastway Roundabout
- Sugar Island Road to Bleary Road Junction
- Tandragee Road, Mourne View Avenue and Pollock Drive to Gilford Road
- Toberhewny Lane Lower to Pollock Drive
- Tullygally East Road to Drumbeg Roundabout
- Union Street to Mourne View Avenue
- A26 Waringstown Road and A50 Banbridge Road to Whinny Road in Gilford
- West Street and Jervis Street to Armagh Road
- West Street, Market Street, Woodhouse Street, to Woodhouse Street loop
- Whinny Road and Tandragee Road to Scarva Road
- Windsor Ave, Castle Lane to Market Street

Roads Gritted Within Banbridge Section

- Church Square, triangulated junction, Church Street, A26 Lurgan Road to A26 Tullyraine Road
- Church Street, Maypole Hill, Gallows Street, Milebush Road to A1 Hillsborough Road, (including slip road)
- C307 Glebe Road, C297 Upper Ballynahinch Road, B178 Comber Road to B177 Ballynahinch Road
- A25 to and including the B8 Roundabout
- A27 to B3 at Auglish Cottages
- Market Square, Rathfriland
- B3 to A1
- B6 Ballynahinch Road, B6 Burren Road to B2 Dromore Road
- B7 Ballyrone Road, B7 Tirkelly Hill, B7 Dromara Road
- C328 Banbridge Road to C306 Hillsborough Road, Dromara
- Banbridge Road (including slip road) to Lower Quilly Road
- Banbridge Road to Church Street Roundabout
- Banbridge Road, Lower Quilly Road to A1 Banbridge Road (including slip road)
- Barban Hill and Rampart Street
- B177 Belfast Road to C306 Dromara Road
- Broken Bridge Road to A26 Lurgan Road
- Carlisle Park, Hillfoot Crescent, Windmill Gardens, Windmill Lane to junction Harmony
- A50 Castlewellan Road and A25 Castlewellan Roundabout
- A50 Castlewellan Road, Bridge Street, Newry Street and Commercial Road
- Downshire Place, Commercial Road to Newry Street
- Downshire Road (turn right via monument) and Bridge Street
- C306 Dromara Road, C307 Magheraconluce Road to Ballynahinch Road
- C306 Dromara Road, C307 Magheraconluce Road, Glebe Road
- B2 Dromore Road, B2 Ballynahinch Road (into Dromore)
- Dromore Road to A1
- Edenderry Road, Scarva Street, Anderson Street
- Fort Street to end of development
- Forthill Green, Forthill Avenue to Fort Street
- From barriers at Newry Street to barriers at Bridge Street
- Gall Bog Road to C132 Tullynisky Road
- B10 Glenloughan Road and B10 Scarva Road to Peggy's Loanin

- U119 Grove Road to B175 Spa Road
- Hill Street to The Rowans
- Hillsborough Road (including slip road to Mossvale Road
- C307 Howe Road and Kinallen Road to C328 Banbridge Road
- Huntly Road and Reilly Street to Victoria Street
- Huntly Road, Peggy's Loanin and Iveagh Drive to Reilly Street
- Kenlis Street to Roundabout
- Kenlis Street, Rathfriland Street, over Cut, Scarva Street
- B25 Knockgorm Road and C328 Waringsford Road to A1
- B25 Knockgorm Road to Gall Bog Road
- B3 Legananny Road to Loughbrickland centre
- Linen Hall Street and Ballygowan Road to Harbeton Park
- B177 Lisburn Road, B177 Ballynahinch Road to Main Street, Hillsborough
- Lisburn Road to junction of Riverside Road
- Market Square to Maypole Hill
- Maypole Hill to A1 Banbridge Road (including slip road)
- Mays Corner Road, B10 Banbridge Road into Rathfriland (U-Turn around Market Square)
- Meeting Street, Pound Hill, Wallace Park
- B7 Moneyslane Road, B7 Rathfriland Road and C306 Hillsborough Road to B7
- Mossvale Road to Princess Street in Dromore
- Mount Street to Princess Street
- New Flyover at Dromore Road, Banbridge
- New Underpass at Loughbrickland
- Newry Road to Roundabout
- Newry Street to A25 Newry Road
- Newry Street, Bridge Street, Church Square, Dromore Street
- Old Manse Road to A50 Castlewellan Road
- Past Iveagh Bungalows and John Street to Church Square
- Pound Hill, C310 Diamond Road to C328 Gall Bog Road
- Princess Street, Market Square, Bridge Street, Meeting Street, roundabout, bridge over A1 to Outlet Centre (U-Turn)
- B3 Rathfriland Road, Loughbrickland Road, Newry Street to Newry Road
- B10 Rathfriland Road, B10 Glebe Road, B10 Monteith Road
- B10 Rathfriland Road over A1 to slip road to A1 (towards Newry)
- Riverside Road to junction of B2 Dromore Road
- Scarva Road, Peggy's Loanin to Iveagh Drive
- Scarva Street to Downshire Place
- Scarva to B10 Glenloughan Road
- Slip Road to A1
- Slip Road to Hillsborough Road
- Slip-road to A1
- Slip-road to Rathfriland Road
- Townsend Street to Kenlis Street
- Tullynisky Road to Aughnaskeagh Road, Waringsford
- Victoria Street and Reilly Street to Scarva Road
- Wallace Park

Papers Referred to the Executive

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to list the subject matter of each of the 39 papers that his Department referred to the Executive between May 2007 and 7 December 2009; and to state whether the Executive agreed each paper. (AQW 4277/10)

Minister for Regional Development: It is not our practice to disclose details of Executive business. The content of Executive papers and all aspects of Executive business are confidential.

Water Supply in the Crotlieve District

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the number of (i) burst mains water pipes; (ii) airlocks; and (iii) other problems with the water supply that have occurred in the Crotlieve District Electoral area during the last 6 months. (AQW 4279/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that in the past six months there have been 64 repairs undertaken on burst watermains and 262 other water supply related repairs in the Crotlieve District electoral area. NIW does not record details of airlocks in the water distribution system and is therefore unable to provide the information requested.

NI Water

Mr D Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) what human rights protections are in place within NI Water in relation to embedded contract personnel to ensure (a) proper management; (b) fair employment; and (c) appeals mechanisms; and (ii) how are these rights monitored and reported on. (AQW 4348/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it does not recognise the term 'embedded contract personnel'. However, for staff employed by contractors engaged by NIW, all issues relating to the proper management, fair employment and appeals mechanisms are the responsibility of the respective contractor. NIW does not monitor how contractors discharge these responsibilities in respect of their employees.

Easibus Service in Bangor

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration his Department has given to new partnerships with outside bodies to help retain the Easibus Service in Bangor. (AQW 4368/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The decision to withdraw Easibus services in Bangor was taken in consultation with Translink which informed the Department that these services are largely duplicated by the more frequent Bangor town services. It was also taken in the knowledge of the availability of door-to-door services which meet the needs of people who find it difficult or impossible to use conventional public transport. In these circumstances my Department has not considered developing new partnerships to retain Easibus services in Bangor.

Flooding at 21 Ballyblack Road, Newtownards

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development why, despite assurances from NI Water, work has not been carried out to alleviate the flooding at 21 Ballyblack Road, Newtownards; and for a definitive date when the work will be completed. (AQW 4378/10)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the planned repair work on the culvert at 21 Ballyblack Road, Newtownards has unfortunately been delayed due to the wet and freezing weather conditions over recent months. A CCTV survey of the culvert is required prior to repair work commencing. This can only be undertaken during dry conditions and the culvert has been full of water during all recent inspections. It is planned to commence work as soon as the conditions allow.

Claims for Falls and Injuries

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of claims for falls and injuries against his Department in (i) the Ards District; and (ii) the Strangford District in each of the last three years.

(AQW 4408/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The claim information sought in AQW 4408/10 is not maintained by my Department's Central Claims Unit in the requested District format. It is maintained by Roads Service Section Office area. The Ards Section Office area includes the Ards District. The Down Section Office area includes the Strangford District. This District information could only be provided at disproportionate expense. The claims information for the whole of the Ards and Down Section Office areas is set out in the following table.

	Total Compensation
2008/09	
Ards Section Office	£63,730.20
Down Section Office	£60,088.63
Total	£123,818.83
2007/08	
Ards Section Office	£77,510.04
Down Section Office	£22,596.50
Total	£100,106.54
2006/07	
Ards Section Office	£87,815.45
Down Section Office	£30,878.54
Total	£118,693.99

Legal Fees Incurred in Dealing with Claims

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of legal fees incurred in dealing with claims made against the Department in (i) the Ards District; and (ii) the Strangford District in each of the last three years.

(AQW 4409/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The cost of legal fees has been prepared on a Roads Service Section Office basis in the same format used to provide the related compensation expenditure in Question No. AQW 4408/10. The legal costs have been disaggregated into their three principal elements. These elements comprise claimants' legal costs, my Department's legal defence costs and "other costs". "Other costs" comprise the statutory repayments of social security and NHS tariff charges due to the Compensation Recovery Unit of the Department for Social Development.

	Total Claimants' Legal Costs	Total DSO Costs	Total Other Costs
2008/09			
Ards Section Office	£32,011.07	£10,194.78	£5,966.76
Down Section Office	£32,296.36	£21,121.36	£400.37
Total	£64,307.43	£31,316.14	£6,367.13
2007/08			
Ards Section Office	£47,616.19	£17,209.82	£2,548.10
Down Section Office	£14,161.33	£3,175.50	£152.76
Total	£61,777.52	£20,385.32	£2,700.86

	Total Claimants' Legal Costs	Total DSO Costs	Total Other Costs
2006/07			
Ards Section Office	£47,346.03	£19,534.03	£288.14
Down Section Office	£22,057.52	£11,023.94	£349.71
Total	£69,403.55	£30,557.97	£637.85

Car Park at Ballarena Railway

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development if he can give an assurance that the car park at Ballarena Railway halt will be resurfaced, to improve conditions for wheel chair users. (AQW 4462/10)

Minister for Regional Development: Whilst Translink do not have any current plans to resurface the car park at Bellarena, they will review the position in order to identify reasonable adjustments that could be made for a wheelchair user within the car park. This may include the possibility of surfacing a single wide bay near the entrance which would be suitable for wheelchair users.

DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Village Area of South Belfast

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the announcement in February 2009 on the new housing initiative in the Village area of south Belfast to allow homeowners to buy a new home without having to meet the five year qualifying period, does she intend to include rehabilitated houses as well as new houses in the scheme. (AQW 3877/10)

Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie): I plan to publish proposals in the coming weeks to support owner occupiers in redevelopment areas to remain in their community post regeneration.

These plans will include both new build and refurbished homes that may be available following the redevelopment of an area.

Vested Houses

Mr J Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development, in the event of a vested house being refurbished instead of demolished, can she confirm if the house will be offered back to the original owner. (AQW 3878/10)

Minister for Social Development: I understand that this question refers to the Village area of Belfast.

Within the Village area the vast majority of houses which will be vested will be demolished to make way for new housing. The only exceptions are those dwellings in the Improvement Area which will be vested and improved for social housing - all are currently unoccupied and blocked up.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr A Ross asked the Minister for Social Development if people who live on a 'floating home,' which is deemed as their permanent residence and receive an annual marine fee from the NIHE, are entitled to receive a grant from the Warm Homes Scheme. (AQW 3907/10)

Minister for Social Development: Applicants to the Warm Homes Scheme must be in receipt of a qualifying benefit and their home must lack one or more of the measures capable of being provided under the scheme. People who live on a 'floating home' may be entitled to apply for help if they satisfy the eligibility requirements of the scheme. However, from a technical point of view, it is difficult to see how any of the measures allowed

under the scheme (cavity wall insulation, loft insulation or a new central heating system connected to an oil or gas supply) could actually be provided within a 'floating home'.

Community Workers in the Kilcooley Area of Bangor

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on community workers positions in the Kilcooley area of Bangor. (AQW 3922/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Department currently funds the costs of a community development manager and part time administrator within the Kilcooley Community Forum. This funding is due to end on 31 March 2010. An application for further funding is currently being assessed. It is anticipated that the assessment will be completed and a decision made within the next few weeks.

Areas at Risk Programme

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the Areas at Risk Programme in the Beechfield Estate, Donaghadee. (AQW 3923/10)

Minister for Social Development: My officials in VCU have met with the Beechfield Residents Association to see if further assistance can be provided in the short term whilst the findings of the neighbourhood survey are digested, priorities agreed, an Area Action Plan developed, and a two year proposal under the Areas at Risk Programme proposed, appraised and implemented.

New Social Housing in The Glens Electoral Ward

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Social Development what new social housing will be provided in The Glens electoral ward in the next 3 years. (AQW 3929/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested. However, the table below lists the social housing schemes in the Social Housing Development Programme 2009/10 for the North Antrim parliamentary constituency. The Housing Executive is currently formulating the new 3 year draft Social Housing Development Programme for 2010/11 – 2012/13 which, subject to obtaining appropriate approvals, will be published on the Housing Executive's website in early 2010.

Scheme name	Units
St Patrick's Barracks, Ballymena (Surplus Site)	47
Garvaghy Avenue Phase 1, Portglenone (T)	13
Caherty Road, Broughshane	48
Churchfields, Rasharkin	4
Garryduff Gardens, Ballymena Road, Ballymoney	5

Disabled Facilities Grant: Building Work

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she has considered introducing a system to ensure that building work being carried out under a disabled facilities grant will be completed in the event that the contracted builder cannot continue the work. (AQW 3937/10)

Minister for Social Development: There is a system in place to ensure work is completed. Where the approved cost of grant works exceeds £5000, the Housing Executive sets a condition that the applicant must use a builder who is a member of one of the following recognised Warranted Builders Schemes:-

- Building Guarantee Scheme (BGS)
- Contractors Insurance Guarantee Services (CIGS)
- Construction Insurance Direct (CID)

- Contractors Register Ltd (CRL)
- National Register of Warranted Builders (NRWB)

The purpose of these schemes is to protect applicants in the event of a dispute or the Contractor failing to complete the grant scheme. The warranty scheme will arrange for the work to be completed. In relation to cases where the cost of works is under £5000, these are generally plumbing works; do not involve major building works; and the average cost is £2900. Payment is usually only made when the Housing Executive and the Occupational Therapist confirms they are satisfied that the work has been completed. If the contracted builder cannot complete the work, as payment has not been made, the applicant may then seek another contractor to complete the work. Where there is a problem the Housing Executive Grants Office will assist to resolve any issues.

Scrabo Residents' Association Business Plan

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm if funding has been allocated for the consultation process for the Scrabo Residents' Association business plan for the new community centre in the Scrabo Estate, Newtownards. (AQW 3939/10)

Minister for Social Development: My officials in VCU have been awaiting this proposal since October 2009. Following much prompting I can confirm that a proposal to the value of £1586 was received on 12th January 2010 from Ards Development Bureau and Community Network.

I understand that the purpose of the project is to carry out a detailed site survey, consult with residents and other agreed stakeholders and prepare a sketch design, as well as provide a detailed breakdown of costs in preparation for a potential new community facility within the Scrabo estate.

Given the urgency, the appraisal of the proposal was made a top priority and I am pleased to inform you that it has been approved. A contract was issued to Ards Development Bureau and Community Network on 22 January 2010 allowing them to commission the work.

Social Housing Provision

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she would consider a more cost effective method of social housing provision, such as a leasing scheme from developers. (AQW 3940/10)

Minister for Social Development: When I launched the New Housing Agenda I made it clear we would look to bring forward more innovative solutions that would help us deliver more houses for those in greatest need. We have already done that by bringing forward greater levels of private investment, attracting record funding from the European Investment Bank and introducing a new Procurement Strategy to maximise the use of our existing resources.

Other initiatives are currently being explored including the potential to lease homes as the member suggests directly from developers. My officials are already working closely with the Housing Executive, Housing Associations and Strategic Investment Board to examine a number of possible leasing models and if these can be brought forward to meet housing need and represent value for money, they will have my full support.

Halifax First Time Buyer Annual Review 2009

Mr B Leonard asked the Minister for Social Development, given the evidence of the Halifax First Time Buyer Annual Review 2009, what specific measures will be put in place to deal with the shortcomings of the present policy approaches on affordable housing. (AQW 3946/10)

Minister for Social Development: Prior to the Credit Crunch, many potential homebuyers were priced out of the market. The Halifax First Time Buyer Annual Review suggests the principal factor now making homeownership difficult for first-time buyers is the tightened lending criteria. Investing more in social and affordable housing is a key element of the government's strategy for tackling housing affordability and alleviating the impact of the economic downturn. My Department has introduced a number of initiatives to provide affordable homes for those in need of assistance. These include: (i) the amended House Sales Scheme, with an attractive bonus, which gives social tenants the opportunity to buy a share in their home; (ii) providing unprecedented levels of funding for Co-Ownership Housing which has enabled it to secure an additional private finance of £48m; (iii); allowing

Co-Ownership participants to increase their share of homeownership in steps of 5%, rather than 12.5%; and (iv) encouraging developer-led equity schemes.

If there are shortcomings in relation to affordable housing they relate to resources rather than policy.

Privately Owned Houses in the Holylands Area of South Belfast

Mr J Craig asked the Minister for Social Development how many privately owned houses in the Holyland area of south Belfast have been purchased by her Department or associated agencies for social housing in each of the last five years. (AQW 3953/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive's records for social housing starts during the 5 year period (2004/2005 – 2008/2009) indicate that Housing Associations have not acquired any privately owned houses in the Holyland area of South Belfast for social housing.

St Patrick's Barracks Site, Ballymena

Mr D McKay asked the Minister for Social Development how many social housing units her Department plans to build on the St Patrick's barracks site in Ballymena, if it is acquired by an appointed Housing Association. (AQW 3973/10)

Minister for Social Development: I can confirm that Fold Housing Association is currently in negotiations with Defence Estates to purchase 47 existing properties at St Patricks Barracks, Ballymena.

There is also a Master planning exercise being carried out by DSD for the wider St Patrick's Barracks site which covers approximately 42 acres. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive had expressed an interest in acquiring approximately 10 acres of this site to provide up to 200 housing units, most likely on a mixed tenure basis. This interest will be subject however to the feasibility and planning issues that are being considered as part of the ongoing master planning work.

Cold Weather Payment

Mr A McQuillan asked the Minister for Social Development what steps she is taking to ensure that all future cold weather payments are made in time. (AQW 3993/10)

Minister for Social Development: Once a cold weather period has been triggered, a computer scan of the benefit systems is run the following weekend by the Department for Work and Pensions to identify those customers in the geographical areas affected who satisfy the qualifying criteria and are entitled to receive an automatic payment. Once this has been done, payments are normally issued within a further three working days. Exceptionally, where a large number of weather stations throughout the United Kingdom trigger cold weather payment periods at the same time, this can increase the period when payments can be issued up to a week. There are no plans to change these arrangements.

Cold Weather Payment

Mr A McQuillan asked the Minister for Social Development in which post code areas people did not receive their cold weather payment in time. (AQW 3995/10)

Minister for Social Development: I refer to my previous answer (AQW 3993). I am not aware of any significant delays in payments made to those customers entitled to receive a cold weather payment. Anyone who considers that they are eligible for a payment and have not yet received it should contact their normal benefit paying branch for further advice.

Co-ownership Housing Scheme

Mr A McQuillan asked the Minister for Social Development how many first time buyers applied, and were successful in their application for the Co-ownership housing scheme in the 2008/09 financial year.

(AQW 3996/10)

Minister for Social Development: A total of 381 applications were received by the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association during the 2008/09 financial year. In the same period, 325 applicants received help to buy their first home.

Heating Replacement Schemes

Ms C Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to detail heating replacement schemes that her Department currently provides broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 4018/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested. The tables below provide the information by Housing Executive administrative area.

TABLE 1: HEATING REPLACEMENT SCHEMES CURRENTLY INCLUDED IN THE HOUSING EXECUTIVE'S PROGRAMME FOR 2009/10:-

Housing Executive Administrative Area	Schemes	Dwellings
Belfast	7	701
North East	7	542
South	7	475
South East	7	440
West	6	396

TABLE 2 - HEATING REPLACEMENT SCHEMES CURRENTLY INCLUDED IN THE HOUSING EXECUTIVE'S PROGRAMME FOR 2010/11:-

Housing Executive Administrative Area	Schemes	Dwellings
Belfast	8	697
North East	2	262
South	6	486
South East	6	463
West	3	198

Review of Public Administration

Ms C Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to provide clarification on the transfer of functions from her Department to Local Government before any resolution is achieved on the Review of Public Administration. (AQW 4019/10)

Minister for Social Development: I fully support a vision of strong local government that has the needs of all citizens at its core and which is fully empowered through its responsibility for community planning.

My Department will be transferring substantial functions to the new local Councils including responsibility for the delivery of urban regeneration, support for the voluntary and community sector at local level, and a number of housing functions.

I am confident that these functions will complement the existing services and functions of local government; and we will work in partnership with our colleagues in local government to achieve a smooth transition to their delivery by the new local Councils in May 2011.

Benefit Uptake

Ms C Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to provide examples of how her Department is promoting benefit uptake in the wider community. (AQW 4021/10)

Minister for Social Development: My Department provides a range of services to make the wider community aware of benefit entitlement. This includes outreach services, local promotional activity, the production of specific publications, some in minority ethnic languages, DSD and NIHE websites, general assistance with advice and information through our network of local and centralised offices and an online Benefits Adviser Service. The Benefits Adviser Service provides information on potential eligibility for benefits and tax credits. It also includes a Calculation and Comparison Service which gives an estimate of potential entitlement to key benefits. The service is available to both working age and older people and can be used anonymously by individuals or advice organisations with internet access.

The Warm Homes Scheme includes advice on maximising household income and incorporates a benefit check ensuring vulnerable people are claiming all the benefits to which they are entitled.

Also all new public sector tenants are encouraged to apply for Housing Benefit and, where relevant, Rate Relief and Lone Pensioner Allowance. Applicants are taken through the application process as part of the social housing tenancy commencement exercise.

Proposed Newbuilds in the Derry City Council Area

Mr R McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development how many of the proposed new builds in the Derry City Council area this year are bungalows. (AQW 4028/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is as follows:

- Fold Housing Association's scheme at West Bank which is programmed to go on site in 2009/10 includes two bungalows.
- Two schemes which commenced in 2008/09 and are currently under construction include the following bungalow provision:-
- Habinteg Housing Association's scheme at Lourdes Hall includes four bungalows
- North & West Housing Association's scheme at Dove Gardens includes four bungalows.

Funding to the Housing Executive Grants Office

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how much additional funding has been allocated to the Housing Executive Grants Office in Dundonald; and (ii) if this additional funding will be available to address the outstanding renovation grants applications. (AQW 4032/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive's Grants office in Dundonald has received additional funding of £735,000. The additional funding will allow the Housing Executive to consider applications (Category 1 cases) for the discretionary Renovation, Replacement and Home Repairs Assistance grants. These will be dealt with in date order according to the date of their previous application.

Disabled Facilities Grant Applications in the Strangford Area

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many Disabled Facilities Grant applications in the Strangford area have had to have top-up grants in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4033/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is not available in the format requested. However, the table below details the information for the Ards, Castlereagh and Downpatrick council areas:-

Council Area	2007	2008	2009
Ards	12	21	23
Castlereagh	6	4	4

Council Area	2007	2008	2009
Downpatrick	4	2	12

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how many homes in the North Down area have benefited from the Warm Homes Scheme. (AQW 4045/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has had responsibility for the administration of the new Warm Homes Scheme since 1 July 2009. From that date to 20 January 2010, 108 properties in the North Down area have had measures installed under the Warm Homes Scheme.

Prior to that, the scheme was delivered by EAGA plc on behalf of the Department for Social Development. The Housing Executive is unable to provide the information in the form requested for that period.

Co-ownership Applications

Mr J Craig asked the Minister for Social Development how many co-ownership applications have been made in this financial year to date; and how many have been successful. (AQW 4052/10)

Minister for Social Development: A total of 1,152 applications were received by the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association between 1 April and 31 December 2009. In the same period, 394 applicants received help to buy their first home. Co-Ownership Housing is expected to achieve its target of providing 500 homes in this financial year.

Houses of Multiple Occupancy

Mr J Craig asked the Minister for Social Development how many houses of multiple occupancy are registered in each council area. (AQW 4053/10)

Minister for Social Development: The table below details the number of Houses in Multiple Occupation registered in Northern Ireland as at 31 December 2009 in each District Council area:-

District Council Area	HMOs Registered in Northern Ireland (at 31 December 2009)
Derry	363
Limavady	4
Coleraine	644
Ballymoney	2
Moyle	1
Larne	6
Ballymena	24
Magherafelt	9
Cookstown	26
Strabane	5
Omagh	10
Fermanagh	5
Dungannon	38
Craigavon	4
Armagh	4

District Council Area	HMOs Registered in Northern Ireland (at 31 December 2009)
Newry	7
Down	2
Lisburn	2
Antrim	5
Newtownabbey	54
Carrickfergus	5
North Down	15
Ards	1
Belfast	1177
Banbridge	0
Castlereagh	0
Total	2413

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Mr P Butler asked the Minister for Social Development what percentage of children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder are currently entitled to Disability Living Allowance, in each Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 4069/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is not held by my Department.

Housing Associations

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what powers she has to ensure that housing associations maintain their housing stock to a suitable condition and standard for tenants. (AQW 4075/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Order 1992, Article 4 (1) (c) gives the Department the power to “exercise supervision and control over registered housing associations”. The Departments Housing Association Guide, Part 6 and the Regulatory Framework, Standard 3.3, outlines the Associations requirements for maintaining their housing stock. Compliance against these requirements is checked by the Departments Governance & Inspection Unit, through a rolling Programme of Inspections of all Housing Associations.

Disabled Facilities Grant Applications

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many disabled facilities grant applications in North Down have had to have top-up grants in each of the last three years. (AQW 4078/10)

Minister for Social Development: The table below details the information for the North Down council area:-

2007	2008	2009
14	10	18

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications have been made for the Warm Homes Scheme in North Down; and how many have been turned down, in each of the last three years. (AQW 4080/10)

Minister for Social Development: The new Warm Homes Scheme commenced on 1 July 2009. Prior to that, the scheme was delivered by EAGA plc. When their contract for Warm Homes ended, EAGA handed over all the records they held relating to the scheme to the Department for Social Development. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive holds those records on behalf of the Department.

It is not possible to analyse those records in the manner requested. However, since the start of the new Warm Homes Scheme on 1 July 2009, approximately 861 applications have been received in the North Down area, of which approximately 614 have been unsuccessful because they did not meet the eligibility criteria.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development the average time taken to process a Warm Homes Scheme application. (AQW 4083/10)

Minister for Social Development: There are 3 stages in the application process. The Scheme Managers are required to process 90% of applications from initial enquiry to property survey within 6 weeks; they are required to process 90% of applications from property survey to works complete within 6 weeks. The target for installations works is completion within 3 days.

The Warm Homes Scheme is currently achieving the following performance against those standards:

1. 84% of surveys are currently being completed within 6 weeks from date of first contact to date of survey;
2. 85% of installations are currently being completed within 6 weeks from date of survey to date of installation;
3. All (100%) installation works are currently being completed within 3 days.

The Housing Executive as Scheme Administrator continues to work with Scheme Managers to achieve the target by the end of the year.

Disabled Facilities Grants

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of the backlog of Occupational Therapists' reports on disabled facilities grant applications, if she would consider paying 90% of the grant to applicants whilst they await the final report. (AQW 4090/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive currently pays up to 90% of the grant where there is a delay in receiving the Occupational Therapist's report, providing the work is completed to their satisfaction.

Disabled Facilities Grants

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what steps she is taking to ensure that Occupational Therapists attend final visits with disabled facilities grants applicants in good time, allowing a final decision on the application to be reached more quickly. (AQW 4095/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive meets with Occupational Therapists at local management level on a regular basis to discuss issues including delays in visits. Individual cases are also raised with Occupational Therapists where a delay is being experienced to expedite the processing of grant payments. The Housing Executive will raise the issue of expediting Occupational Therapy Service inspections with the Housing Liaison Officer to have this addressed at the Head Occupational Therapists Forum.

Disabled Facilities Grant Reports

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she would co-operate with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to discuss the secondment of an Occupational Therapist to deal specifically with disabled facilities grants, as O.T. reports are essential to the completion of grant applications. (AQW 4118/10)

Minister for Social Development: As part of the Joint Departmental Review, the Housing Executive considered options including the appointment of an Occupational Therapist to deal with housing issues. It was subsequently decided to appoint a Housing Adaptations Liaison Officer, funded jointly by the Housing Executive and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, to help improve the Housing Executive's delivery of services to persons with a disability.

Renovation Grants

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if applicants for renovation grants, whose applications were shelved in 2009 due to a lack of funding, will be able to re-apply now that extra funding has been announced in January 2010. (AQW 4121/10)

Minister for Social Development: The recently announced additional funding means that the Housing Executive is now in a position to consider applications from approximately 640 of the discretionary Renovation, Replacement and Home Repairs Assistance grants Category 1 cases, which are now being dealt with in date order according to the date of their previous application.

Disabled Facilities Grants: Home Extensions

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to explain why extensions carried out through disabled facilities grants in North Down and Ards homes are larger than the extensions carried out on homes in Belfast. (AQW 4123/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive is not aware that extensions carried out through disabled facilities grants in North Down and Ards homes are larger than the extensions carried out on homes in Belfast. However, it is the Occupational Therapist who makes a recommendation and specifies the size of the adaptations based on the needs of the person with a disability.

Mortgage Rescue Scheme

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development (i) to outline any pilot schemes her Department has engaged in regarding a possible mortgage rescue scheme; (ii) when the pilots concluded; and (iii) what the conclusions were. (AQW 4134/10)

Minister for Social Development: There are currently no pilot Mortgage Rescue Schemes in operation.

Help for People Facing Home Repossession

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development what work her Department has carried out with the judiciary, financial institutions and other bodies to help people facing repossession of their homes. (AQW 4135/10)

Minister for Social Development: Helping those who have difficulty making mortgage payments is a priority for me. Although my Department has had no dealings with the reserved matters of justice and the regulation of financial institutions and markets in this regard, I can confirm that with my officials I have met on a number of occasions with the Council of Mortgage Lenders both to encourage responsible lending to homebuyers and to press lenders to ensure that affordable mortgage products are made available which help first time buyers and which will, in turn, help the wider economy. Despite restricted resources I have been able to provide over £100,000 in the current year to the Housing Rights Service to enable it to pilot the Mortgage Debt Advice Service. This pilot service, which is due to run until May 2010, provides advice to people experiencing difficulty making mortgage payments and is part of wider government's initiatives aimed at preventing people here from becoming homeless as a consequence of housing-related debt.

People Sleeping Rough

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development what percentage of people sleeping rough are foreign nationals. (AQW 4137/10)

Minister for Social Development: Although there have been isolated incidents outside Belfast where foreign nationals have been identified as sleeping rough, it is only within Belfast that meaningful statistics can be supplied and from which a best estimate can be inferred. In December 2009 there were 118 engagements, by the appropriate services, with rough sleepers in Belfast of which 16 engagements or approximately 14% were with foreign nationals.

Mortgage Rescue Scheme

Mr S Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how many bids the Department for Social Development has made in in-year monitoring rounds for a mortgage rescue scheme in each of the last three years; and what was the quantum of each bid. (AQW 4138/10)

Minister for Social Development: My Department made an initial bid for funding in respect of a Mortgage Rescue Scheme of £5 million in the June 2008 monitoring round. From that date my Department has submitted subsequent bids as follows:

Monitoring Round	September 2008	December 2008	February 2009	June 2009	September 2009	December 2009
Amount	£5 million	£1 million	Nil	£5 million	£5 million	£5 million

Unfortunately, none of the bids have been met. However, I have been able to provide funding to launch a Mortgage Debt and Advice Service to increase the level of advice for people experiencing difficulty making mortgage payments. This specialised service is preventing people here from becoming homeless as a consequence of housing-related debt.

Housing Executive Tenancy

Mr B McElduff asked the Minister for Social Development how the Housing Executive responds to requests to succeed tenancy when the applicant is able to provide persuasive evidence of residency for more than a year but is unable to provide bank statements or utility bills because of their particular circumstances. (AQW 4167/10)

Minister for Social Development: In order for a succession request to be granted, the applicant has to satisfy the Housing Executive that he/she had been residing in the dwelling as his/her only or principal home throughout the period of twelve months ending with the tenant's death. The Housing Executive has issued general guidelines to staff giving examples of evidence that may be produced to satisfy themselves that the person requesting the succession of tenancy has been residing in the dwelling for the relevant period of time. This includes a search of the Housing Executive's computer systems and tenant files; a letter from an employer or payslips with address on them dating back 12 months; proof from Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; Bank Statements; Electoral Registers; Utility Bills; Housing Benefit records; letters from a GP or other Health Professional, member of Clergy, Solicitor. This is not a definitive list and any evidence provided will be evaluated by the Housing Executive to be satisfied that the person applying for the succession was living at the dwelling as his/her only or principal home for 12 months.

Investing for Health Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 3505/10, to outline the collaborative working her Department has been involved in around the Investing for Health Strategy. (AQW 4171/10)

Minister for Social Development: : My Department works extensively with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) in the pursuance of common objectives. Significant interdependencies exist between the Investing for Health Strategy, with its aim of tackling the factors which adversely affect health

and perpetuate health inequalities, and my Department's goals in relation to addressing social and economic deprivation.

Collaborative work to address the wider determinants of poor health occurs at both strategic and operational levels. My Department contributes to the work of the Ministerial Group for Public Health and a DHSSPS official represents health interests on the Cross-Departmental Ministerial Group on Neighbourhood Renewal. At a local level health officials also sit on Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships. My officials have, or continue to be, involved in the formulation and oversight of strategies in relation to suicide, mental health, obesity, drugs and alcohol and physical activity. The Department also plays an active role on the Investing for Health Fuel Poverty Steering Group. In addition officials are members of the Investing for Health and Health Action Zones partnerships and participate in events organised under their auspices.

Collaborative work has delivered action on the ground in relation to a wide range of health related matters. These include; home accident prevention, homelessness, fuel poverty/energy efficiency, mental health and well-being, health impact assessments, supported housing, older people services, workplace health promotion, home improvement grants and adaptations and a wide range of Neighbourhood Renewal health improvement initiatives. My officials continue to work in partnership with the DHSSPS, Health Trusts and Public Health Agency staff on developing and delivering a range of health projects.

‘Open Door’ Accommodation Project in Clooney Terrace, Derry

Ms M Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development if she can confirm that the Housing Executive intends to remove support, via the Supporting People initiative, for the ‘Open Door’ accommodation project in Clooney Terrace, Derry; and, if so, to outline the reasons for this decision. (AQW 4189/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive, through the Supporting People Programme, fund Open Door for 3 supported accommodation schemes. One of these schemes provides supported accommodation for up to 6 vulnerable young people at Clooney Terrace in Derry City. This service receives £137,667 annual funding.

There have been a number of recent developments in policy and legislation regarding the accommodation of young people aged 16-17. As a result, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is working in conjunction with the Regional Health & Social Care Board, the Western Health & Social Care Trust and Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority to review the suitability and future role of a number of existing supported accommodation projects for vulnerable young people.

As part of this process the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Supporting People and the Western Trust are engaging in discussion with a number of providers on the future role and direction of services for this client group.

Discussions are ongoing and funding continues to be provided to the project.

Housing Executive Properties

Mr G Savage asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive properties are currently vacant in (i) the Upper Bann constituency as a whole; (ii) Banbridge and the outlying areas; (iii) Lurgan and the outlying areas; and (iv) Portadown and the outlying areas. (AQW 4193/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested. However, the table below details the number of Housing Executive vacant dwellings in the Housing Executive's District Office areas of Banbridge, Lurgan and Portadown, as at 31 December 2009.

Housing Executive District Office	Banbridge	Lurgan	Portadown
	54	109	26

Note: These figures include dwellings which are undergoing major repairs or improvements, for decanting, awaiting relet, pending demolition and for sale.

Peace Garden at Townsend Street, Strabane

Mr A Bresland asked the Minister for Social Development how much has been spent to date on the creation of the Peace Garden at Townsend Street, Strabane. (AQW 4224/10)

Minister for Social Development: The total spend to date in relation to the Peace Garden at Townsend Street, Strabane is £27,835 which includes capital costs and fees.

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act

Ms C Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development how her Department is implementing Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, given that she has removed the ring-fencing and implementation of equality protection in the Social Housing guidelines. (AQW 4225/10)

Minister for Social Development: Under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 all public bodies are required to carry out their functions with due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity.

My Department and the Housing Executive are both designated by the Equality Commission as Public Bodies in their own right and as such are obliged to set out in an Equality Scheme how the organisation proposes to fulfil its statutory duties. An Annual Progress Report is also submitted to the Equality Commission outlining the work undertaken each year to deliver on the commitments and obligations set out in those respective Equality Schemes.

The removal of ring fencing from the Strategic Guidelines for the formulation of the Social Housing Development Programme has already been considered by the Housing Executive within the context of a full Equality Impact Assessment. This did not determine the removal of ring fencing to be detrimental to any of the groupings identified within Section 75 in terms of equality of opportunity.

Strand Road Traders Association

Ms M Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development if she is aware of the concerns of the Strand Road Traders Association which were raised regarding the Public Realm Scheme in Derry with the North West Development Office; and whether she intends to consider the proposals put forward by the traders in relation to access and parking. (AQW 4237/10)

Minister for Social Development: My Department's North West Development Office received a letter from the Strand Road Traders Association on 20 January 2010. This is the first correspondence from this group on the Derry City centre public realm scheme.

The letter does not detail any specific concerns on the scheme. It does however ask for a number of changes to be made.

As some of the proposed changes would require the approval of both Planning Service and Roads Service my officials have sought their input.

My officials wrote to the Strand Road Traders Association on 22 January 2010 advising of this and seeking clarification from the group on a number of issues.

When my officials have all the relevant information a full reply will be issued to the Strand Road Traders Association.

Pensioners

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what percentage of pensioners are currently solely reliant on a state pension and other state benefits. (AQW 4253/10)

Minister for Social Development: This information is not available in the format requested.

Benefit Enquiries

Mr P Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what progress has been made in introducing a single contact phone number for all benefit enquiries. (AQW 4256/10)

Minister for Social Development: There are no plans to introduce a single contact phone number for all benefit enquiries. The complex nature and qualifying criteria for each benefit means that specific benefit knowledge and expertise is required to deal with customer enquiries. It would not be possible to provide this via a single contact number without making the customer interaction extremely lengthy and complicated. However, the Agency provides customers with a single phone number contact for each of its centralised benefits and plans, through the Customer First pilot, to extend this provision to customers of the Northern local office network.

Funding for Cultural Groups

Mr J Craig asked the Minister for Social Development what cultural groups are in receipt of funding from her Department; and how much funding has been allocated to each group for the 2010/11 financial year. (AQW 4287/10)

Minister for Social Development: My Department allocates funding to a range of Cultural Groups through programmes such as Neighbourhood Renewal, Community Volunteering Scheme Small Grants Programme and the Modernisation Programme. Details of funding allocated to each group for 2009/10 and 2010/11 are listed below in the table.

Group	2009/10	2010/11
An Droichead	45,599	46,764
Andersonstown Traditional & Contemporary Music School	40,630	41,670
Ardinariff Historical and Cultural Society	640	
Armagh Bands Forum	1,000	
Bangor Drama Club	1,100	
Border Arts	1,100	
Burnfoot Community Development Association	59,241	
Cairncastle L.O.L. 692 Community & Cultural Group	1,100	
Carlton Street Community Development Association	97,950	
Chinese Art & Calligraphy Association	758	
Chinese Language School	1,100	
Docksider's Senior Men's Group	1,100	
Enniskillen True Blues Co-ordinating committee	100,000	
Glenelly Historical Society	1,000	
Iionad Uibh Eachach ¹	164,322	81,870
Kilrea & District Ulster Scots Society	800	
Meet N Eat Friendship Club	604	
Mount Vernon Community Development Forum	30,288	31,056
Mourne School of Highland Dancing	500	
Naiscoil Na Fuisgeoige	31,923	32,566
NI Pakistani Cultural Association	1,100	
North West Tongues, Tones & Tappin	800	
Pearse Og GAA	100,000	

Group	2009/10	2010/11
Pobal	79126	38842
Sailortown Cultural & Historical Society	1,100	
Schomberg Fife & Drum	400	
St Brigids Accordion Band	400	
The Gasyard Development Trust	44,793	45,990
TRC Promotions Ltd (Willowstone Festival)	1,100	
Tuesday Club	604	
Voluntary Arts Ireland	27,017	15,064
West Belfast Athletic & Cultural Society	52,685	52,685
Total	£889,880	£386507

1. Ionad Uibh Eachach are funded through Neighbourhood Renewal and Modernisation Programmes

Belfast City Centre Regeneration Directorate provides grants for cultural activities in the Laganside area via the Laganside Events Grants Programme. However this grants process has not yet been completed and the amount of individual grants has not been determined.

Community Care Grants

Mr J Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many people in the Strangford constituency applied for Community Care grants; and how many of these applications were successful, in each of the last three years. (AQW 4316/10)

Minister for Social Development: This information is not recorded in the format requested.

Efficiency Proposals

Mr A Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to outline her Department's efficiency proposals. (AQW 4362/10)

Minister for Social Development: My Department's proposals within the Budget 2007 exercise covering 2008 - 2011 are detailed in its Efficiency Delivery Plan on the Department's internet site. My Department is currently considering additional savings as part of the review of Spending Plans for 2010-11. It is required to find additional savings in 2010-11 of £13.4m for current expenditure and £16.9m in respect of capital expenditure.

My officials are currently examining all business areas and all expenditure lines to find ways to live within our reduced budget while providing the best service we can. Final decisions on where the reductions will fall will be made over the next few weeks. At a high level, the areas for savings in current expenditure are: £0.3m in the Core Department; £6.1m in Housing Division; £4.9m in the Social Security Agency; £0.5m in the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division; and finally £1.6m in the Urban Regeneration and Community Development Group.

Decisions on where the capital savings will be made have yet to be agreed.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Assembly Questions Emailed

Mr D McKay asked the Assembly Commission how many Members have opted to have answers to their Assembly questions emailed, rather than receive hard copies. (AQW 4213/10)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson): There has been one formal request from a Member to have answers to their Assembly questions asked to the Assembly Commission emailed rather than receive hard copies.

Paper Used in the Assembly

Mr D McKay asked the Assembly Commission what plans it has to reduce the amount of paper used in the Assembly and to increase the amount of correspondence sent by email. (AQW 4215/10)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr S Neeson): The amount of paper used within the Assembly has been identified as one of the key areas to be addressed by the Sustainable Development Office, to assist in the reduction of the Assembly's environmental impact.

The main initiatives planned both in the short and longer term are summarised as follows;

- Increasing Members and Staff awareness of the environmental impact of paper use and suggesting steps they can take to reduce the amount of paper used e.g. encouraging double sided printing and photocopying, sending copies of documents electronically via e mail where possible, electronic rather than hard copy filing of documents
- Replacement of existing photocopiers with those with enhanced performance to encourage reduction in paper use e.g. copiers with double sided copying as a default setting, networked copiers to allow documents to be emailed directly for copying, password release functions on copiers to reduce unnecessary copying
- The Information Systems office is investigating the advancements in electronic reader technologies with a view to potentially introducing these for Members. Their introduction would significantly reduce the amount of paper used for committee packs etc.

Revised Written Answers

This section contains the revised 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.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Capital Spend on Sporting and Cultural Projects

In Bound Volume 46, page WA22, replace the answer to question (AQW 2833/10) asked by Mr Shannon with:

The forecast capital spend for the current financial year on Sporting and Cultural Projects is £64,543k. This can be broken down into:

- (i) Sporting Projects - £23,382k
- (ii) Cultural Projects - £41,161k

The department also intends to spend £1,850k on Inland Waterways and Inland Fisheries projects.

An analysis of this proposed spend across constituencies is tabled as Annex 1.

You will note that certain amounts have been described as unallocated. There are a number of reasons for this: funds may not yet have been allocated to specific recipients; successful applications may not yet have been announced; and spend or proposed spend may cover a number of constituencies or be in the nature of central administration cost (eg IT equipment) and be impossible to allocate between them.

I would caution that while these forecasts have been carefully prepared, they are subject to a range of factors and are therefore subject to change.

ANNEX 1

DEPARTMENT OF ARTS, CULTURE AND LEISURE

FORECAST CAPITAL SPEND IN 2009/10 ANALYSED BY CONSTITUENCY (REVISED)

Capital Spend for 2009/10 by Constituency				
Constituency	Cultural £000's	Sports £000's	IWIF £000's	Total £000's
North Down	2,324	972	27	3,323
Strangford	19	202	12	233
Lagan Valley	8	28		36
North Antrim	14	783	283	1,080
South Antrim	1,663	1,080	18	2,761
East Antrim	394	100	12	506
Upper Bann	0	1,409	32	1,441
East Londonderry	782	796	44	1,622
Belfast North	1,527	615	10	2,152
Belfast East	16,689	963	12	17,664
Belfast West	67	793	25	885
Belfast South	7,907	1,166	8	9,081
Foyle	781	1,545		2,326
South Down	23	5,980	522	6,525
Fermanagh, South Tyrone	2,940	1,514	748	5,202
Mid Ulster	16	1,449	27	1,492
West Tyrone	304	1,248	10	1,562
Newry and Armagh	410	1,222	18	1,650
Unable to allocate	5,293	1,517	42	6,852

Capital Spend for 2009/10 by Constituency				
Constituency	Cultural	Sports	IWIF	Total
	£000's	£000's	£000's	£000's
Total (Based On December proposed monitoring)	41,161	23,382	1,850	66,393

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Efficiencies Agreed by the Executive

In Bound Volume 46, page WA291, replace the answer to question (AQW 3123/10) asked by Mr Hamilton with:

Efficiencies have been made in Housing, Urban Regeneration and Community Development programmes, the Social Security Agency, the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division and in my Department's Core administration.

The efficiency target for 2007/08 of £49.4m was agreed with the previous direct rule administration, and was achieved. In 2008/09, the value of achieved efficiencies was £19.62m. As at 30 September 09, my Department was on track to achieve the cumulative full year efficiency target of £38.1m.

EDUCATION

Libraries NI

In Bound Volume 47, page WA194, replace the answer to the question (AQW 4094/10) asked by Mr Clarke with:

The Libraries NI proposal to stop using the former SEELB Library HQ at Ballynahinch as a Regional Administrative Centre is a separate exercise from the identification of a future location for Libraries NI's corporate (headquarters) functions.

An Economic Appraisal which considers the options for locating Libraries NI's corporate functions is being prepared and this should be presented to the Libraries NI Board in February or March 2010. As such the process of identifying and short-listing potential locations is ongoing.

Ballynahinch former library HQ is being considered as a location for Libraries NI's corporate services functions in this Appraisal, along with other underutilised library accommodation and other options (such as renting or buying a new headquarters). Ballynahinch will not be closed until a decision regarding the location for Libraries NI's corporate functions has been agreed.

No final decision has been taken by the Libraries NI Board on the location for its corporate functions.

Grammar School Places

In Bound Volume 47, page WA140, replace the answer to the question (AQW 3852/10) asked by Mr Lunn with:

Léiríonn na táblaí iata (i) líon na ndaltaí atá ag freastal ar bhunscoil i ngach ceantar Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne a bhain na gráid C1, C2 nó D amach; (ii) líon na n-iarratas a fuair scoileanna gramadaí i ngach ceantar Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne ó dhaltaí a bhain na gráid C1, C2 nó D amach; agus (iii) líon na n-iarratasóirí a bhain na gráid C1, C2 nó D amach ar glacadh leo i scoileanna gramadaí i ngach ceantar boird oideachais agus leabharlainne, i ngach bliain de na trí bliana acadúla a chuaigh thart.

The tables, attached, show (i) the number of pupils attending primary school in each Education and Library Board area who received grades C1, C2 and D; (ii) the number of applications received by grammar schools in

each Education and Library Board area from pupils who received grades C1, C2 and D; and (iii) the number of applicants who received grades C1, C2 and D who were admitted to grammar schools in each Education and Library Board area, in each of the last three academic years.

Please note:

- the information available does not distinguish between pupils who received an upgrade due to special circumstances and who were admitted to a grammar school and those who did not receive an upgrade due to special circumstances and who were admitted to a grammar school;
- applicants who attended primary school in one Board area may apply to a post-primary school in another Board area, therefore, it is not possible to provide the percentages requested.

Admission to Post Primary School in 2007/08									
Board Area	(i) ¹ Total Number of Actual Grades Received by Pupils Attending Primary School in each Board Area			(ii) ² Total Number of Applications Received by Grammar Schools in each Board Area			(iii) ² Total Number of Applicants Admitted to Grammar Schools in each Board Area		
	C1	C2	D	C1	C2	D	C1	C2	D
Belfast	160	179	782	321	262	324	216	118	95
Western	232	264	877	164	121	100	110	60	17
North-Eastern	291	306	1,154	222	205	236	149	116	66
South-Eastern	296	263	1,008	157	110	68	50	11	7
Southern	183	165	570	111	87	101	86	62	42
Totals	1162	1177	4391	975	785	829	611	367	227

Admission to Post Primary School in 2008/09									
Board Area	(i) ¹ Total Number of Actual Grades Received by Pupils Attending Primary School in each Board Area			(ii) ² Total Number of Applications Received by Grammar Schools in each Board Area			(iii) ² Total Number of Applicants Admitted to Grammar Schools in each Board Area		
	C1	C2	D	C1	C2	D	C1	C2	D
Belfast	211	198	771	524	362	432	164	71	49
Western	257	257	700	165	108	81	102	34	16
North-Eastern	362	346	1,055	301	252	218	158	54	46
South-Eastern	296	277	908	188	101	74	21	5	6
Southern	216	205	496	177	134	140	59	41	27
Totals	1342	1283	3930	1355	957	945	504	205	144

Admission to Post Primary School in 2009/10									
Board Area	(i) ¹ Total Number of Actual Grades Received by Pupils Attending Primary School in each Board Area			(ii) ² Total Number of Applications Received by Grammar Schools in each Board Area			(iii) ² Total Number of Applicants Admitted to Grammar Schools in each Board Area		
	C1	C2	D	C1	C2	D	C1	C2	D
Belfast	163	158	750	343	269	350	206	91	114
Western	286	262	833	215	143	131	138	62	46

Admission to Post Primary School in 2009/10									
Board Area	(i) ¹ Total Number of Actual Grades Received by Pupils Attending Primary School in each Board Area			(ii) ² Total Number of Applications Received by Grammar Schools in each Board Area			(iii) ² Total Number of Applicants Admitted to Grammar Schools in each Board Area		
	C1	C2	D	C1	C2	D	C1	C2	D
North-Eastern	283	281	1,107	222	188	236	149	77	95
South-Eastern	287	276	971	141	77	65	43	8	4
Southern	188	187	545	129	96	141	69	45	56
Totals	1207	1164	4206	1050	773	923	605	283	315

Source:

1. Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
2. Education and Library Board

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Easibus Service, Bangor

In Bound Volume 46, page WA351, replace the answer to question (AQW 3543/10) asked by Mr Easton with:

For the financial year ending in March 2009 the operating cost to Translink of providing Easibus was £136,858.00, to which DRD contributed £38,360.69.

Easibus Service, Bangor

In Bound Volume 46, page 351, replace the answer to question (AQW 3544/10) asked by Mr Easton with:

In the 2008/09 financial year, the four Easibus services in Bangor provided 42,800 passenger journeys.

Easibus Service

In Bound Volume 47, page WA172, replace the answer to question (AQW 3829/10) asked by Mr Weir with:

The table below sets out the number of passenger trips made on Bangor Easibus services in each of the last three financial years.

Period	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09
Number of Passenger Trips	52,284	51,914	42,800

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